REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I WOKE UP PILOTING THE STRONGEST STARSHIP!
NOVEL
WRITTEN BY
Ryuto
ILLUSTRATED BY
Tetsuhiro Nabeshima

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REBORN AS A
SPACE MERCENARY
I woke up piloting the strongest starship!
Hiro
"Chris, open up!"
"Work, work, and work, it never ends, ends, ends..."
Mimi
Chris
Chris regresses from overwork...?

Serena
Fighting a four-armed monster in environment suits?!
....

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Afterword

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

MEZAMETARA SAIKYO SOBI TO UCHUSEN MOCHI DATTA NODE,
IKKODATE MEZASHITE YOHEI TOSHITE JIYU NI IKITAI Vol.8
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Prologue

I WOKE UP to the feeling of someone climbing into bed with me. All I could see was the gentle sunlight through my closed eyes, but I managed to seize the intruder anyway and pulled them into a tight hug. They struggled at first but gave up surprisingly easily. I drifted back to sleep, the comfortable warmth of their body next to mine.

"Good morning!" Mimi called. "Oh? Master Hiro?" Her voice sounded much further away than expected.

"Mm…?"

Huh? Mimi wasn't the intruder…? Elma doesn't do this, and the twins might, but they'd've come together… I felt the intruder all over. She seemed about Mimi's size.

"Nnh…" My hand touched something plush and soft. Nope. Not as big as Mimi's.

Hmm? Where the heck am I exactly?

"Um… Should I come back in an hour?" Mimi's hesitant voice yanked me awake all at once. A cold sweat began pouring down my back, and I tore the blanket off.

A girl was in my bed, looking up at me with flushed cheeks and tears in her eyes. "B-be gentle, please… Well, you can rough me up a little, I guess…"

"Chris?!" I yelped. "Chris, why?!"

Fortunately, my screams did *not* wake up everyone at Count Dalenwald's estate in the imperial capital. *That's a noble's mansion for you. Fantastic soundproofing just saved my life.*

"The absolute nerve of you, screaming like that!" Chris puffed her cheeks up in an angry pout.

"Hey, I said I was sorry." Any guilt I felt was totally overshadowed by how absolutely adorable she was. It wasn't like she was seriously angry either; she was over it in no time.

After the tournament, we'd returned to Grakius Secundus, where we'd picked up two dead-eyed mechanic twins before going back to the capital. We were currently guests at Count Dalenwald's mansion while we did some errands here in the capital. My second landing request at the capital had gone through surprisingly easily. Why? Who knew. Was it because I was famous? Because I had gateway rights? Because I was a platinum-rank mercenary? Maybe it was due to my Gold Star.

"Anyway, uh, could you maybe not do that again?" I asked. "My heart can't take much more of this."

"Did it make your heart beat faster?"

"Fast enough to make me think I was having a heart attack."

Seriously, I can't take any more.

Chris—Christina Dalenwald—was the sole heiress of Count Dalenwald's title and fortune. Abraham Dalenwald, her grandfather, was the current head of the Dalenwald family. Chris's parents had been murdered by her uncle, and the ensuing battle over succession—her father had been the previous heir—had ended with Abraham executing said uncle. The *Krishna*'s crew had gotten wrapped up in the dispute, resulting in us working with Chris for a while. That led to Chris and I developing a… Well, "friendly" wasn't the best word to describe our relationship. Regardless, I'd earned her grandfather's trust in the process.

Chris herself was a cute girl with black hair and eyes that were such a dark purple that they too looked almost entirely black. She was short, about Mimi's height, and her figure… *How do I put this?* Let's just say she'd probably grow in the future. Chris liked me—maybe a little *too* much—but I hadn't laid a finger on her. She was a count's granddaughter, after all. And unlike Mimi, she was underage. *Even I have standards.*

Mimi, who was walking with us, chimed in. "Ah, ha ha… It surprised me, too."

Mimi was a normal girl from a colony—or so we'd thought. We recently learned that her grandmother was the emperor's younger sister. It was a classic, common trope: the most normal-looking person in the room always wound up dropping the biggest bombshell of them all. By the time we learned the truth about her genealogy, it was far too late for me to

abstain from being intimate with Mimi. I was prepared to have to fight the Grakkan Empire itself for her, but the emperor was a surprisingly understanding guy. He'd arranged to have the truth suppressed so she could keep living a life of freedom with us as a mercenary.

Of course, that had led to the whole tournament, where I'd ended up gathering a lot more attention than I'd originally wanted. But we could just consider that the price I had to pay to keep Mimi by my side.

I left Mimi and Chris and headed over to the bathroom to get ready. There, I bumped into Elma, who'd just finished doing the same.

"Morning, Elma."

"Morning, Hiro. Did you sleep well?"

"I did, but I was in for a hell of a shock when I woke up," I complained.

Elma looked at me questioningly, long slender ears poking through a curtain of silver hair. She wasn't just a veteran mercenary with five years of experience; she was also the daughter of Viscount Willrose. This was another bit of information I'd recently learned, but it wasn't actually all that surprising. Elma always had a "rich girl" sort of vibe, so I'd had my suspicions. Learning about Elma's past might not have been shocking, but meeting her family was a total fiasco. Her father was furious that I'd sullied his beautiful daughter, and her brother—sister-obsessed freak that he was—had challenged me to a duel. Her sister and mother sided with us, though. They helped us to calm her father down, and I'd earned her brother's respect during the tournament. And we all lived happily ever after.

"Wh-what? Why are you staring at me?"

"You're as beautiful as ever, Elma."

"Jeez…" Elma blushed and smacked my arm. "Do we have to do this so early in the morning?"

Fortunately, this cutie typically knew when to hold back. When I *really* made her mad, she'd put me in a murderous submission hold. Seriously, do *not* make her angry. I might be able to put up a decent fight these days, but her raw strength still kicked my ass, not to mention her reaction speed.

I quickly finished getting ready and went to the mansion's dining hall. Mimi and Chris were already there, accompanied by a woman with striking mechanical parts on either side of her head, wearing a maid's outfit. It seemed she was here to help make breakfast.

"Morning, Mei."

"Good morning, Master." She bowed, expressionless.

Mei was a type of android aptly called a Maidroid, designed by yours truly. From her glossy black hair and intense eyes to the chic Victorian-style maid's outfit and red-framed glasses, not to mention her shapely—though not quite as big as Mimi's—bosom… Yep, Mei was the perfect Maidroid. I'd spared no expense in customizing her specs either, making Mei a top-tier machine strong enough to easily trounce your common, run-of-the-mill battle bots.

"Where are the dwarves?" I asked her.

"They asked that I not wake them, as they're 'too tired to live.'"

"Figures…"

The twin dwarven mechanics who maintained our ship were still sleeping. The pair were currently on loan from Space Dwergr. I didn't know all the details, but they apparently didn't get on well with the people at Space Dwergr's main office. Space Dwergr didn't want to mess with me, so when I'd told them I was bringing my mechanics to the capital planet with me, they readily released them. Either way, letting them rest was probably best for now.

"Anyway, let's have breakfast. Where's the count?"

"My grandfather is working at the imperial castle today. He'll be home this evening, though, so I'm sure he'll join us for supper," Chris answered.

Aha, so the great Count Dalenwald is busy. Being a noble's gotta be pretty rough.

"All right, then. We'll be back this evening," I declared. "Let's get a little exercise in after breakfast, and then go shopping or something. Heck, we can eat lunch somewhere nice, too."

“Okay! I’ll look up good restaurants in the area!” Mimi’s eyes sparkled at the prospect of delicious food in the near future. I had to wonder if her grandmother had run away because she was just as eager to discover and try fabulous new foods as well as freedom and adventure.

“Fantasizing about lunch is great and all, but let’s get past breakfast first, all right?” Elma interjected.

“Okay…”

Chris watched their exchange with a wistful smile. Maybe she was reminiscing about the time we’d spent together on the ocean resort planet.

“You joining us for breakfast, Chris?” I asked.

“I am, Sir Hiro.”

I couldn’t stay with her forever, but I’d try to make up for it by making memories while we could. And hey, I could use gateways freely now, so maybe it wouldn’t be so hard to meet up with Chris anymore.

* * *

I finished my solo exercises on the training grounds after some light sword practice—or light enough that I hadn’t gotten injured, at least—with Mei in the mansion’s courtyard. Then the mechanics *finally* woke up.

“Mornin’…” yawned Tina.

“I’m sorry we overslept like that,” said Wiska.

These two were twins, by the way. The yawning, redheaded one with the faux-rural guild accent was the older sister, Tina. The one apologizing was the younger sister, Wiska, who was polite, serious, and blue-haired. They looked as young as—maybe even younger than—Chris, but they were actually adults my own age. *Why* did they look like adults stuck in the bodies of kids? Well, they were dwarves. Dwarven women in this sci-fi universe didn’t have cute button noses or beards, like they did in the fantasy stories they were commonly found in; they looked like little human girls. Both had superhuman strength that defied their appearance too. You were in for a world of hurt if you were rude to them.

“Don’t worry about it,” I replied. “What do you want to do about breakfast? If you eat now, you won’t have room for lunch.”

“Would you like me to prepare tea with milk and sugar for you?” Mei offered.

“Yes, please!”

“Thank you very much.”

Mei promptly began preparing tea for the twins. They’d sate their appetites with a light snack for now and then have lunch with us later.

“Shoppin’, huh? Where’re we goin’?” Tina asked.

“Hmm… I guess we’ll buy clothes and stuff.” Elma shrugged.

“But you just bought a dress recently, didn’t you?” Wiska noted.

“Yeah, but I’m talking about normal, everyday clothing. The capital city sells lots of nice clothes made with new Edge-Tech technology. You can order custom clothes, too.”

“Why not just get clothes that are *actually* normal?”

Nope, no idea what “Edge-Tech” means. Oh, come to think of it, I did buy Mimi and Elma that anti-laser material underwear… Is that what it’s called? Edge-Tech?

“Edge-Tech clothes are so much more comfortable, even if the design is the same. Plus, their mercenary line is made with anti-laser and blade-resistant material. It’s even got medical nano-cloth that stops bleeding and treats wounds and stuff.”

“Huh…” I considered it for a moment. “That does sound cool. We might as well check it out. If we like it, we’ll buy some.”

“And how expensive is this stuff?” Tina asked, grimacing.

“I’m sure we can afford it now, Sis.” Wiska was right. They could probably afford to splurge a good deal these days. After all, they were getting paid that hefty bonus.

The twins weren’t formal members of the *Krishna* or *Black Lotus* crew; they were mechanics on loan from the *Black Lotus*’s manufacturer. The circumstances behind it were a little abnormal, to say the least, but they

were basically here for two reasons: to study their new model in action, and as a token of Space Dwergr's apology. Like I said, a little weird.

Chapter 1:
In the Imperial Capital

"PHEW, NOW *THAT* was a shopping trip!"

We'd arrived at a shopping mall full of stores selling Edge-Tech products an hour later and proceeded to enjoy a nice shopping trip.

"Like it that much, didja?" Tina tilted her head to one side, dubious.

"Sure did," I said. I didn't know about her, but I was more than satisfied.

I'd purchased a personal shield, a device about the size of a soda can that used cutting-edge technology to create a protective barrier around the user. The shield output was variable and pretty powerful too, thanks to its two energy packs. At its lowest setting, it could protect you from the frontier planets' insects, worms, and the like—which were often venomous and tended to carry dangerous diseases—for long periods of time. Ratchet up the power, and it could even protect you from laser rifle fire. You wouldn't be able to keep that up for very long, of course, but you could always just swap out the energy packs.

"But what're ya gonna use it for?"

"Ground combat, of course. It'll be handy if we ever wind up on a frontier planet, too."

"Are we actually plannin' on goin' to one?" Tina looked up at me.

"Er, we *might*," I said, averting my eyes.

I mean, I'd bought the chameleon thermal mount without knowing if I'd ever really use it, and that *had* come in handy… This definitely would too. Probably. Okay, *maybe*.

"Anyway, don't sweat the small stuff."

"You may think nothin' of droppin' that much Ener in one go, hon, but don't waste all your money."

“It’ll help if the situation ever comes up, so it’s not like it’s a total waste.”

“All right, I won’t argue with ya. I’m too nice.”

“Aw, Tina, you’re so kind,” I deadpanned. “Thank you ever so much.”

“Ah ha ha!” Tina laughed despite her protests. “Yeah, very sincere. Anyway, are ya sure ya don’t wanna join your girls?”

“I probably shouldn’t say this, but women always take *so long* when they’re shopping… Especially when they’re looking for new clothes.”

I was currently walking around the mall with Tina. Everyone else was in the middle of a pilgrimage to every single boutique selling Edge-Tech goods. Tina and I had slipped away to look at, you know, fun stuff.

“Well, you’re not wrong. Wis loves dressin’ all cute, and she takes ages pickin’ out clothes.”

“You don’t do any clothes shopping, Tina?”

“Nah. Wis does all the shoppin’ for me. We’re the same size and shape.” Tina shot me a thumbs-up and a lame wink. *And you’re okay with telling me that?*

“What about you, hon?”

“Eh, I’ll have the girls tell me all about this edge material stuff later. And if I want some, I’ll just order stuff that looks like what I’ve got on now.”

“I bet your closet’s full, but it’s all just the same outfit.”

“Ha ha ha.”

She nailed it, actually, so I’ll just laugh that off. Look, my wardrobe is comfortable, functional, easy to maintain, and anyone can tell at a glance that I’m a mercenary. It’s super convenient!

We strolled around for a while, making fun of some of the shops as we went, when I suddenly heard my ringtone coming from my chest pocket. *Are they done already? That was fast!* I thought as I took out my terminal and looked at the screen.

“Hon? You don’t look so good.”

I must've been making a weird face without realizing it. The name displayed on my terminal wasn't Mimi, Elma, or Mei. It was Lieutenant Commander Serena. Or rather, Lieutenant Colonel Serena, since she'd been promoted.

"Hi," I said, answering the call. "Hiro here."

"It's been a while, Captain Hiro. I trust you've had the chance to relax a bit lately?"

"Yeah, and it's all thanks to you. We're staying at Count Dalenwald's imperial estate at the moment. So, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Straight to business, is it? I appreciate your directness, but shouldn't a Gold Star platinum-ranker be more of a conversationalist?"

"Well, excuse me. I'll try to do better, sorry." I decided to just apologize and move on.

"You do that. Now, as per our discussion about purchasing military-grade battle bots…"

"Oh, did you get me permission?"

"Yes, and without any issues. I'll send the digital certificate to your terminal. All you'll need to do is visit a bot manufacturer at your convenience. Present your certificate, and you shouldn't have any trouble with your purchase. I'll also attach a letter of introduction. The Holz family has invested in Eagle Dynamics, so they'll be more than happy to accommodate you."

"Roger. Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel."

"And with that, I've repaid my debt for the crystal war matter. Remember to repay me for all the trouble you've put me through, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Don't work me too hard, now."

"Hee hee… Goodbye, then." She hung up.

Don't you giggle at me! That's scary! What kind of annoying work is she gonna push on me? And the fact that she can summon me from anywhere at any time now that I can use gateways doesn't exactly give me the warm fuzzies. Good grief!

“Change of plans. No more clothes shopping this afternoon, after all.”

“We’re off to buy battle bots, huh? Can’t wait!” Tina was obviously excited to get the chance to fiddle with new mechas—sorry, cutting-edge, military-grade battle bots.

I was excited, too. What guy doesn’t love fighting robots?!

* * *

We had lunch at a high-class sushi bar-type restaurant. While we ate, I had Mei set up an appointment at Eagle Dynamics, so we could head straight over after our meal.

The Eagle Dynamics office occupied a very impressive structure located close to the imperial castle’s military division. I looked up, taking in its awe-inspiring size, when we arrived. *Yep, that’s one tall building, all right.* Security battle bots were stationed at the entrance, while bots of every sort imaginable stood on display.

“I’m told their factory is underground.”

“Ooh, so they do the manufacturing here, too?”

“Wow, look how many there are!” Mimi exclaimed. “And they all look so strong!”

“Don’t they? They’re all so fascinating. Many of these are rarely ever seen,” Chris said.

I smiled as they excitedly discussed the battle bots on display. Then, I took a good look at them myself.

“We don’t need big ones, do we?” Elma asked.

“Nope. I mainly want them to fight off pirates who try to board the *Black Lotus*.”

“And to give pirates a taste of their own medicine by boarding their ships?”

“Exactly.”

In that case, battle bots that were about the size of cars and trucks were out of the question. The smaller car-sized ones could travel through the hallways of the *Black Lotus*, but it’d be impossible to actually to deploy them there. They’d be limited to the hangar and cargo space.

“Small or medium ones…” I mumbled to myself.

“Isn’t this one cute, Chris?” Mimi asked.

“Oh, it is!”

Mimi and Chris squatted down and examined a standard-sized battle bot, at least for the smaller-sized ones. It was about the size of a small dog, and while it had low endurance, it boasted lethal laser guns. Depending on their specs, some could even charge at enemies and self-destruct. They sure were one of the more annoying battle bots to deal with.

“Hmm. Do we wanna keep it basic or go specialized?” Tina wondered aloud.

“Specializing one would increase its performance, but I do love versatile robots,” Wiska replied. “Oh, Sis, this one’s fascinating!”

“Ooh, a modular kind, huh?”

The twins mainly surveyed the medium-sized bots, which ranged from the size of a large dog to a big motorcycle. These were the obvious choice. There were even humanoid models, which stood at just under two-and-a-half meters tall.

“I bet the humanoid ones are the most popular,” I mused.

“I dunno,” Elma said skeptically. “I don’t think being humanoid makes them inherently better.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” I replied.

And anyway, stupidly tall ones like that might look more heroic, but they weren’t the most practical. I personally found the quadrupeds with weapons on their backs to be a more logical choice.

“Fighting indoors means we need something that can maneuver in tight spaces. Instead of prioritizing how many legs it has, we should focus on shields, durability, and firepower.”

“You may be right,” Elma agreed before moving to the medium-heavy bot displays. They lacked mobility but made up for it with strong plating and shield capabilities, as well as ample firepower. Their laser-rifle-class firearms and grenade launchers were nothing to sneeze at.

“Think this is our sweet spot?” I asked.

“I don’t like how slow they are. There’s no point if they won’t make it to the fight in time.”

“That’s true.”

People in suits—Eagle Dynamics employees—approached as Elma and I discussed our options, Mimi and Chris tailing after them.

“Captain Hiro, I presume?” said one of the employees. “My name is Pijo. Are you here for your appointment?”

“Pleased to meet you, Pijo,” I replied. “I’m Captain Hiro, and this is Elma, one of my crew members.”

“Yes, we’ve heard as much from Miss Mimi and Miss Christina. It is an honor to meet you.”

Pijo was pretty jacked for a middle-aged office worker. I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d introduced himself as a soldier or mercenary. “Please, follow me to our office. I can give you the rundown on all our models, including brand-new ones, and show you some options that would suit your needs.”

“I’ll take you up on that. Tina, Wiska!” I called out to the twins as we headed to the Eagle Dynamic’s office. “We’re heading in now!”

Mei trailed behind us. Come to think of it, she hadn’t said much of anything since we’d arrived. “I’d appreciate your opinion, too, Mei.”

She paused, as if hesitating. “Understood.” Maybe she was worried about all the money we’d already spent on the *Black Lotus* after she’d pushed her opinions so hard. Personally, I’d thought it’d been for the best. She didn’t have to worry about the cash end of this.

* * *

The people at Eagle Dynamics really rolled out the red carpet for us. Was it because of Serena's letter of introduction? Or was it because we had nobility with us? Did they just want to pay respect to the new Platinum Rank hot-shot with the Gold Star? I didn't know, but I sure didn't mind.

"It's like we're VIPs!"

"Should we really be in on this?"

Tina and Wiska, on the other hand, weren't very comfortable with this treatment.

"You'll get used to it after a while," Mimi said, smiling gently at them.

It's sweet of her to try to soothe their nerves. Wait, is *she soothing them? It almost sounds like a warning.*

"So, I've been told that you wish to purchase military-grade battle bots today," Pijo said.

"Yeah, that's the plan. We'd like to throw some maintenance equipment into our order too, if possible."

"I see… Our company has a long track record of business with the Imperial Fleet. I'm certain you'll be satisfied." Pijo flashed me a smile and nodded repeatedly as he rubbed his hands together.

That's pretty openly greedy of him. I was a little uncomfortable. But hey, I had a letter of invitation from the Holz family; he wouldn't dream of screwing me over. If he were stupid enough to try, that would shame the Holz family and cause more problems for him than it was worth.

"We noticed you perusing our models outside," he continued. "What exactly are you looking to purchase?"

"Our main goal is to protect ourselves from pirates boarding our mothership while simultaneously launching a counterattack of our own. Also, we'd like to be able to deploy them for emergency landings on planets, just in case."

"I see. Versatile, medium-sized heavy bots sound best, then."

"Yeah. I was thinking the same."

He hit the nail on the head. That's a master merchant for you.

“Those models have the widest variety of options available as well. If you wish to purchase maintenance and module systems alongside your battle bots today, then my personal recommendation would be the Arachne model here.”

Pijo tapped his tablet and brought up a display of the Arachne model. It was a bot with a heavy-looking upper body atop four thick legs with four hardpoints for installing weapons and other equipment. By swapping out its backpack module, it could be given special functions, like charging the enemy, guarding targets, communications, and scouting.

“I see… Very cool.”

“Sure is!”

“It isn’t very cute, though.”

Mimi, I really don’t think you’re supposed to rank death machines on a cuteness scale.

“Ha ha ha, well, around here, we see all our bots as our beloved, adorable children,” Pijo replied lightly. “The Arachne’s military model has a small generator, allowing it to operate for long periods of time without needing to be recharged. It also has ample output, allowing you to choose your equipment without worry.”

Pijo displayed multiple Arachne units, each one with different equipment loadouts. The standard loadout contained two laser rifles on the arms and a small shield generator on the sub-arm. Small missile pods, grenade launchers, and the like were equipped to the backpacks.

“This one has the standard specifications. It defends itself using the sub-arm’s shield and eradicates foes with precise fire. The arm-mounted lasers can be replaced with split lasers and live ammunition, if you prefer. The backpack unit can also be used for a myriad of purposes. First, offensively via missile and grenade launchers. The backpack’s command abilities include a commander pack that comes with a communicator pack and anti-electronic warfare equipment. For support, it has a medic pack that includes medical nanobots and the like. It’s also capable of repairs via a pack that allows the bot to perform emergency fixes on other units. Assault is supported with a pack that enables three-dimensional movement. It can

even sport optical camouflage and electronic deception devices for increased stealth."

"I see. So, basically, the more you buy, the wider your range of potential strategies grows."

"Indeed. And they're useful for more than just battle, too. Both their main and sub arms are perfect for light work, such as carrying equipment and constructing fortifications. They have extra payload capacity as well, allowing them to carry supplies while on expeditions."

"How much does one cost?"

"The standard price is 70,000 Ener. You have a letter of invitation from the Holz family, though, so of course we're prepared to provide even steeper discounts, especially if you purchase multiple units along with their maintenance and module systems."

"All right. Well, to start with…" I paused, considering our options. "Give me the price for ten machines with maintenance and module systems, along with a full set of optional parts."

"Gladly, sir!" Pijo smiled and began his calculations.

I'll have him show us a couple more models, and we'll go from there. Though, it's usually better to follow the advice of pros in these cases—as long as you know enough to not get scammed into buying garbage, at least.

* * *

He showed us several more models after that, but we decided on the Arachne-type military battle bots in the end. I couldn't say no to its high versatility and space-saving features. There were some stronger models, but I passed on those. They were too specialized for fighting, which reduced their versatility.

Serena's letter of introduction and our bulk order had reduced the per unit price to 600,000 Ener. The module systems and options added up to an additional 600,000 Ener therefore making our grand total 1,200,000 Ener.

"Huh… That's cheaper than I expected," Mimi mused.

“Oh, no!” Tina howled. “Mimi’s learning to treat money like a merc!”

“Mimi, 1,200,000 Ener is a *lot* of money,” Wiska chided. “The average person only makes around 1,500 Ener a month. It’d take over sixty-six years to make that kind of cash!”

Their persuasive argument seemed to shock Mimi back to her senses. “I-I suppose it is…”

Good, Mimi, good. Come to the dark side… It’s way more fun over here!

“Now that I think about it, doesn’t Mei have a higher performance than the bots?” Chris asked.

“No doubt about that,” I replied.

“Yep,” Elma said.

Mei bowed her head. “Thank you for your praise.”

“Does that mean you would have been better off getting more high-spec Maidroids, like Mei?”

“Hmm, I’m sure that’s an option, but…Mei?”

“Yes, Master. Miss Chris is correct in that procuring multiple, high-spec Maidroids would be an option. However, my base model alone is priced at 480,000 Ener. After additional options and maintenance facilities are included, the cost would easily cross 550,000 Ener. In other words, two of me would cost 1,100,000 Ener. Buying ten military-grade battle bots for just a hundred thousand more is far more cost-effective.”

Mei matter-of-factly compared the costs and effectiveness of both products.

“Furthermore, there is an issue of uptime,” she continued. “For Maidroids such as myself, two hours of maintenance are recommended for every forty-eight hours of operation to maintain optimal performance and appearance. If I am wounded, then I will need to be repaired by my manufacturer. In contrast, battle bots can work for up to two weeks without requiring maintenance unless they are heavily damaged. Even then, they can be repaired with basic maintenance skills and modular systems as long as the necessary materials are available. In short, battle bots are much better

in an average battle due to their serviceability and long-term fighting capabilities."

"I see," Chris said. "Mei may be much more powerful in terms of pure strength, but military-grade battle bots are sturdier, cheaper, and easier to use."

"Mei's far more suited for guarding Chris, Mimi, Tina, and Wiska, though" I added. "We can't exactly bring battle bots down to colonies with us or take them along to the capital when we wanna take a leisurely stroll, can we?"

"That is true. They're much too intimidating for that."

"Hey, what about me?" Elma demanded.

"Us two don't need bodyguards," I replied. If we needed Mei to protect us, we'd be in a seriously bad situation. Like, in the middle of a battlefield with bullets whizzing past us and dodging lasers kind of bad. Elma looked unconvinced for some reason, but I brushed her off. "Anyway, we're buying the battle bots out of an abundance of caution. I doubt we'll use them very often."

"Fair. It's not like pirates attack and try to board your ship every day."

"Agreed," Mei said. "I do not intend to let them commit such violence upon my master's *Black Lotus* either."

Chris looked like she wanted to ask why we were buying battle bots at all then. And yeah, okay, fair. But listen. We were cursed with bad luck. Better to be safe than sorry.

"We're all done here, so how about we head back to the mansion?" I asked the group. "It's almost dinnertime."

"Okay. My grandfather should be returning soon, too," said Chris.

* * *

"I have a request." Count Dalenwald got right down to business, without so much as a hello.

“Grandfather, please!” Chris yelled angrily.

We’d returned to Dalenwald’s mansion and met up with Chris’s grandfather. The minute he spotted us, he piled work on us. *What’s that? You think he’s crazy? Boy, so do I. This is going beyond blunt and right into what-the-hell territory.*

“Hey, no need to get so upset,” I interjected. “But this *is* pretty abrupt.”

“So it is.” Count Dalenwald nodded. With a quick wave of his hand, his holo-display showed us a map of the Kormat System.

“The Kormat System… It’s a neighbor of the Dexar System, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Kormat III is a habitable planet that has recently completed a long terraforming process. That means the Dalenwald family will begin colonizing it as soon as possible. I would like to request your protection during these early stages of settlement. If any problems arise on Kormat III, it will be your job to resolve them.”

“Guarding a colonization effort, huh?” I replied. “We’ll take the usual bodyguard fee for dealing with pirates, but it’ll be extra for planetary problem-solving. Also, handling pirates who rush the planet will be impossible if I’m out there all alone.”

The *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* could only cover so much area on their own, after all. If tons of pirates descended on the planet all at once, it was physically impossible for us to fend all of them off.

“Of course, I understand. The Dalenwald family will shift our own forces to Kormat III’s defense, naturally. We will also be requesting aid from the Imperial Fleet. You’ll simply be joining us as a mercenary.”

“Depends on the pay, then.” I turned to Elma. “What’s the market price for a platinum-ranker, again?” I asked.

“That’d be 200,000 Ener a day.”

“Then I’ll offer you 300,000 Ener per day,” Count Dalenwald declared. “We will set aside an additional million in case we need more from you.”

“I can accept those terms. How long are we stuck with you?”

“A minimum of one month, but no more than three maximum. We will negotiate a new contract at the end of the first month if we need you to stay on longer. Will that do?”

“Three max, huh? That’s fine with me. Mimi, Elma?”

“I’m okay with that!”

“Same.”

“There you have it,” I said. “Send the request through the mercenary guild, please.”

“Good. I’ll see it done right away,” Count Dalenwald replied. We shook hands, the contract having been mutually agreed upon. “Chris, you will command the colonization fleet. Prove to me that you can succeed.”

Chris, who’d been quietly listening up to this point, agreed. “Yes, Grandfather.”

Ah, so this is how he’s planning on training his successor, huh? The fact that he’s brought us into things is his way of lending her a helping hand.

“Okay, girls, let’s do our best to help Chris succeed.”

“Yeah!” Mimi smiled ear to ear.

“Of course.” Elma gave Chris a soft smile.

Huh. Maybe we’ll get some immediate use out of those battle bots, after all.

Meanwhile, the twins had been paralyzed in the face of Count Dalenwald’s intense, noble countenance the entire time. They were used to Chris, but the count had left them so stunned that they still couldn’t move. The fact that Mimi acted so naturally in the count’s presence was proof of just how well she’d taken to mercenary life.

“So we get a nice vacation while we watch the colonization effort, huh?” I said.

“Yeah! I wonder what it’s like?” Mimi pondered.

“I’ve never seen it myself, but from what I hear, you simply find a place with good land, plop your ship there, and start developing the surroundings,” Elma explained.

We chatted idly. It seemed we were all on the same wavelength: we would absolutely *not* run our mouths and jinx ourselves. Not this time. Unfortunately, Chris didn't get the memo.

"Pirates often appear in the early stages of colonization, targeting settlers and resources. We'll have to be careful," she warned.

I—no, all three of us—sighed and put our faces in our hands, cursing our cruel fate.

So even if we don't jinx it, somebody else will, huh?

* * *

After accepting Count Dalenwald's request, we quickly started preparing for our new job. All we really needed to do was buy a crap-ton of food cartridges in case of an emergency, get medicine for the medical pod, stock up on energy packs for our laser weapons, perform a few quick checks, do some light maintenance on both ships, haul over and install the battle bots and as well as their module systems… *Okay, yeah, maybe it is kind of a lot.*

"And here comes the media," I groaned, "bothering us when we're busiest."

Tina was in the cargo bay, the transport system and cargo bots busily moving things about. "I'm real sorry, hon," she apologized.

I shook my head. "No, it's not your fault. Or Wiska's. We finished our business with that crazy tournament, so it's about time for us to fulfill our end of this deal."

That tournament really had been a pain. Ship battles were one thing, but I've always hated hand-to-hand combat… Yet here I was, a master swordsman, like some J*di controlling the Force. *Then again, they aren't just masters of swordplay; they can predict the future and do all kinds of other stuff in battle. Heck, they can even use the Force to blast you away, strangle you, fire electricity at you…all kinds of stuff like that. Yeah, I probably can't beat one of those guys…*

"So, what's the deal? I figure we'll need to plan meetings and stuff."

“Um, we do have their contact information.”

“Ah, so we’ll have to reach out first, then.”

We hadn’t given them our contact information, so this was our only option. I really didn’t want them to have it—I had my own biases about the media. To be fair, though, they’d given me the worst possible first impression.

I took out my mobile terminal, got the contact address from Wiska’s tablet, and called them.

“Yes, this is Wamdo.” The man who answered sounded tense.

“Captain Hiro speaking. Tina and Wiska from Space Dwergr gave me your number. I hear you want to report on my ship. Let’s talk.”

A bunch of banging, rattling, and rustling sounded over the terminal followed by some real colorful expletives. I’d put it on speaker mode, so Tina and Wiska watched on in wide-eyed astonishment.

“E-excuse us! Thank you so much for reaching out! We’ve been waiting for your call!”

I could just imagine the guy frantically bowing his head in apology on the other side of the receiver. He seemed different from those other media people who’d mobbed the *Black Lotus*.

I couldn’t hear anyone else’s voice anymore. He must’ve moved somewhere quieter. Calmer now, he began discussing their reporting plans. To summarize, Space Dwergr would be joined by other media companies for joint coverage of our current exploits. They would each bring their own recording equipment and exchange information throughout.

“I see. Well, the process is up to you guys. There’s just one problem,” I warned.

“A problem, sir?”

“Yeah. We’ll be working with a certain noble family…” I paused. “Uh, I guess there’s nothing wrong with giving you the name. We got in a request from Count Dalenwald.”

“Ah…” Wamdo gasped, shocked.

If the media wanted to report on a mercenary while they were working for a noble, they had to get the noble's permission first. Naturally, that was their job, not mine. I wasn't about to act like I wasn't involved, though; I'd get them in contact with Count Dalenwald, but negotiations fell on their shoulders, not mine. It wasn't like there was any pressing situation that *required* them to report on me, after all. I had a responsibility to Space Dwergr per the purchase conditions of the *Black Lotus*, but it wasn't an outright obligation. The contract stipulated that I could refuse if it interfered with my work. In other words, if my client wouldn't let the media be involved, that was the end of that.

"I don't mind if you report on me, but I can't speak for my client. So you'll have to take it up with him."

"I-if you could help us at all, that would be…"

"I'll ask my client about getting an appointment with him, but I can't exactly go around leaking the details of my requests. You have more heads than we do, so put 'em together and come up with something."

"Urk… Thank you."

"No problem. I'll do what I can," I told Wamdo, who seemed to be suffering from a sudden stomachache. Then, I called Chris.

"Yes, this is Christina. Do you need something, Sir Hiro?"

"Yeah, sorry. I know it's a little sudden, but…"

* * *

I didn't know what had exactly gone down between Wamdo's people and Count Dalenwald's, but it seemed like he'd actually managed to wrangle permission out of the count.

"I hear he gave 'em a whole buncha rules, though," Tina said.

"Apparently, they were told to record Miss Christina alongside you," Wiska added.

Mimi was in the middle of eating her usual breakfast—a sweet, yellow porridge-like dish—but the spoon stopped halfway to her mouth,

and she tilted her head. “Chris? Why?”

“I guess he wants the media to report on how his future heir is leading a whole planet so he can boost her reputation and authority. You know, a puff piece talking about how she’s young but does her job well and makes good use of the Gold Star, Platinum Rank mercenary Hiro, or whatever. That’ll earn her respect among nobles.”

“Oh, I see…” Mimi nodded.

I honestly had no idea how that blunt old man had been able to negotiate with the media like that, but the fact that he’d been able to use them to both his and Chris’s advantage was proof that he was a born and bred noble.

“How’s it going with acquiring supplies?” I asked. “It looks like the battle bots should be ready to go by the end of today.”

“Resupplying should be done within the day, too,” Mimi answered. “Oh, and I sold the crystal life-form material we’d stocked up on for a nice, high price.”

“Wonderful. I’m leaving what we take to the Kormat System up to your discretion.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied with a smile. Once she had enough experience with commerce, maybe I could have her manage a transport ship eventually. *Wait, then we wouldn’t get to be together. Can’t have that. I’ll just come up with something else.*

“You’re making some weird faces, hon,” Tina noted bluntly.

“Maybe he’s having strange thoughts.”

“Rude. I was just thinking about our future prospects,” I said as I jabbed my fork into the breakfast-steak-like food generated by our Steel Chef 5 cooker. *Mm, fantastic as always, Steel Chef. It’s hard to believe that this stuff is made of algae, krill, and seasoning.*

“Anyway, let’s put that aside and focus on what’s right in front of us. Today’s theme is ‘safety first!’ We’ll probably have to work on the ship all day again, so be careful and don’t make any mistakes.”

Above all else, I didn’t want anyone forgetting to double- and triple-check everything. Honestly, most logistical efforts in this universe only

required giving orders to machines and letting them do the work. I had heard some lesser-equipped stations and undeveloped planets often loaded and unloaded things using special power armor and old-fashioned forklift-type machines, though.

"Gotcha. We'll watch out for accidents."

"That's real reassuring, coming from someone who regularly throws people around like cannonballs," I said, having received such a blow myself.

"Not very persuasive, Sis." Wiska narrowed her eyes in irritation—-naturally, she was the cannonball.

"C'mon, don't be so hard on me. I've been tryin' to do better!"

"Have you really, though?" Wis sighed.

"Really, Wis! Look into my eyes and tell me I ain't sincere!"

I smiled, watching the dwarf twins tease each other as I chowed down my breakfast in earnest. Things had been calm the past few days. I just hoped it'd stay this way. *So it's the calm before the storm, huh? Surely, I was just being pessimistic, right? Ha ha ha…*

* * *

"It is an honor to meet you in person. I'm Wamdo, from Space Dwergr's media division."

"Captain Hiro. Nice to meet you," I said, shaking the unusually short Wamdo's hand.

More staff members were behind him. Some were dwarves, like Wamdo, but there were also humans, elves, some beastfolk, lizardfolk of some type, and a few others I knew nothing about—all of them were humanlike, though. *Hell of an exotic lineup.*

"Are they all here for joint coverage?" I asked.

"Yes. Mobius Strip, Fomalhaut Entertainment, and Nyatflix have all sent staff. Allow me to introduce you."

Each of the three companies' representatives greeted me.

"I'm Allen, with Mobius Strip's second media division."

"Hey there. Zwya, Fomalhaut Entertainment, documentary department."

"I'm Nya from Nyatflix!"

Allen was an elf man. Zwya was a beastman-type alien with fur that almost looked like flames. And the woman named Nya was a beauty with rich, brown skin. In a game like *Call of Cthulhu*, she'd have APP 18 or higher. Elma was hot, sure, but Nya was even hotter. I swore deep down to never, ever get near her. I'd have to let Mei deal with her.

Each company had sent five staff members, numbering twenty in total. Still, the *Black Lotus* could fit them all just fine.

"There are a few things I want to tell you all, now that you're boarding my ship," I announced. "First, my word is law here. If I say white is black and down is up, then it is. You will accept that without question. Got it? If not, you can leave now."

The media staff assented to this demand without issue. Unlike the Space Dwergr folk, who'd charged onto my ship that first time, they were oddly polite and well-mannered.

"Next," I continued, "You will not have free reign of my ship. Specifically, you may not enter the bridge, hangar, cargo space, generator room, or my crew's private spaces unless you have my permission and an accompanying crew member."

They seemed less than pleased about the restrictions, but the tense air relaxed a bit when I added the caveat about asking permission.

"Last but not least: while Wiska and Tina may not be formal members of my crew, they are treated as such. They're not subject to the same rules as you, and you are forbidden from directly or indirectly trying to influence them to work in your favor. The moment I'm made aware of anyone doing so, I'm throwing every last one of you into an escape pod and ejecting you into outer space. I follow through on my promises and trust me, I have the strength to back them up. You all saw the tournament, didn't you?"

They stood up straight and replied, “Yes, sir!”

Yeah, good answer. I’m surprised at how well they listen.

“I suppose that’s enough for now. We’ll launch tomorrow afternoon. I’ve prepared three rooms per firm, twelve in total. You can discuss how you’ll split them among yourselves. If you have any other questions or requests, let’s hear them.” I paused. “Nothing right now? Ask later if you want. You can spend today inside or outside of the ship; it makes no difference to me. But be warned: if you aren’t on the ship by our scheduled departure time tomorrow, we’re leaving you behind.”

I’d have Mei calculate the costs of them staying in the *Black Lotus* and bill their employers later. It was basically pocket change to me, though; compared to the crystal life-form profits, it was no more than a rounding error.

Speaking of the Crystal War, we’d made 2,000,000 Ener in profits from the crystal life-form materials we’d stocked up on at the Imperial Fleet outpost, and that was after deducting purchase costs, handling fees, and the like. Mimi’s bonus would be 3 percent of that—about 60,000 Ener. An outrageous amount, right? But apparently, that was the standard cut in this world. Owning your own ship in this universe was a truly costly venture.

Countries, nobles, and large firms often had dozens, hundreds, even thousands of trade ships. That was what led to them hiring mercenaries like me. *Yep, that’s the circle of life for you.*

After my speech, each group grabbed their luggage and boarded the *Black Lotus*. Mei sent a security key to everyone’s terminal as they boarded. Everyone, that is, except… *Wait, Wamdo, why are you heading my way with all that luggage? Wrong way, my dude.*

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Well, I thought I should let you know, just in case: all of the staff dispatched for this reporting session are people trained in dealing with nobles.”

“Oh? Is that why they had unusually good manners?”

“I suppose it might be. Allow me to apologize once again for what our staff did to you the last time.”

“It’s not like it’s your fault, Wamdo. You don’t have to apologize to me, but I do appreciate it. Consider the apology accepted.”

“Thank you.” Wamdo bowed, turned around, and trudged away with luggage as big as he was on his back.

Wamdo’s group seemed a lot better behaved than the ones who’d charged onto my ship, but maybe that was all the more reason to be alert around them. Wamdo had said they were used to dealing with nobles; that probably included the other company’s representatives, too. In other words, these guys had a ton of experience dealing with the sort of people who could cut them down for any perceived slight. I doubted these media guys had malicious intentions, at least at the moment, but they absolutely had the potential to hurt us if we let our guards down. And I’d be eating and sleeping in the same ship as these people for the next month… Yeah, I needed to stay on my toes.

“And here I thought this would be an easy job. Good grief.”

Life just never goes the way you want it to, does it?

Chapter 2:
To the Kormat System

At the center of the Kormat System was a G-type main-sequence star, much like the Earth's Sun. That star was orbited by a handful of both rocky and gaseous planets as well as an asteroid belt, which was an established source of various ore. Each of the deposits were just a variety of commonplace ores with no Rare Metal sources having been confirmed, but they were still in high demand due to the ore's versatile uses. As such, the Dalenwald family had quickly established mining, refining, and trading colonies in the region. On top of that, the third and fourth planets in the system had the potential to be habitable, so they'd begun terraforming them with support from the empire. The third one, Kormat III, had just finished the process.

"What about the fourth planet?"

"Its environment is so frigid, it'll probably take ten more years to make it livable. Terraforming is a tremendous process."

"Yeah, you're changing a whole planet to suit your needs. Sounds like a big job."

I had no technical knowledge of how terraforming was done, of course. Maybe they used nanomachines somehow? That seemed possible. Although, come to think of it, the method probably changed depending on the planet in question. No matter if it took years, scores of years, or even hundreds of years, turning a place that people couldn't live in into a place where they *could* was just too much for me to comprehend.

"Anyway, space pirates. They've typically gone after refined metals in the past. However, we're expecting an increase in attacks on passenger ships, trading colonies providing materials to residential areas, and trade ships heading to said facilities. That's where we come in."

"This is obvious," I continued, "but we can't do the whole job on our own. The Dalenwald family hired many additional mercenaries to work alongside us, and they've bolstered their private forces currently protecting

the Kormat System. He mentioned the Imperial Fleet having dispatched ships, too."

"The Imperial Fleet…" Mimi snuck a glance at me.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. We'll probably run into her again. We do nine times out of ten. It's an anti-pirate operation, after all. That's right in the Pirate-Hunting Unit's wheelhouse.

"Yeah, I figure she's gonna get involved. It's not a sure thing, but we may as well resign ourselves to our fate."

"Agreed."

"Yep."

Wamdo and the others were confused by our exchange, but that was fine with me. They didn't need an explanation. I didn't want them spreading rumors because I spoke out of turn about something that might not even happen.

"We're the only mercenaries the Dalenwald family hired directly. I'm sure we'll be worked to the bone most of the time, but remember: the more we work, the more money we make. Let's give it our all!"

"Okay!"

"Yep, let's earn some sweet cash!"

"Time for liftoff. Our destination is the Kormat System's trading colony. After departing, we'll join up with Count Dalenwald's escort fleet and use the gateway to travel to the Nipak System. After that, we'll go through the Melkit, Jeagle, and Wellick Systems before reaching the Kormat System."

Mimi, Elma, and Mei, who'd been standing behind us, promptly answered, "Aye-aye, Captain," upon my orders.

Thus, the *Black Lotus*—and the *Krishna* stowed safely away within its hold—finally departed Grakius Secundus.

Four recording devices silently captured the whole thing.

* * *

“This is kind of…”

“Not what you imagined?”

Allen—the elf man from Mobius Strip’s media department—nodded. “Yeah, not quite.”

We were talking in the lounge near the dining hall. It was a large, open space with comfortable couches, a terrarium with live plants, and a large holo-display designed to both make calls and watch movies. Perfect for relaxing on long trips through outer space and hyperspace.

“Being a mercenary doesn’t mean you’re running around guns blazing twenty-four-seven. I’d say we actually spend more time traveling. Besides, we’re tagging along with Count Dalenwald’s escort fleet right now, so I doubt we’ll see combat.”

Only an idiot would attack a noble’s escort fleet. They were much more heavily armed than normal transport fleets, so even if your ambush succeeded, they’d retaliate with unimaginable force.

“Besides, the Imperial Fleet is watching the gateway, and the people in charge of this area know Count Dalenwald’s passing through. It’d be shameful to let another noble be attacked while in your territory.”

“In other words, we can expect that nothing will happen while you’re working with Count Dalenwald?”

“More or less. I’m sure that’s not the only reason you’re surprised, though. We probably live a lot more luxuriously than you expected.”

“Ha ha ha…” Allen brushed off my statement with a vague smile.

Many of the other media staff were relaxing in the lounge space, too. Mei stood nearby. Mimi and Elma were drinking tea in the dining hall with a few of the female staff members, and Tina and Wiska were showing Space Dwergr’s staff around the hangar with my permission.

“Elma definitely said as much when she came aboard. So did Tina and Wiska,” I said. “I don’t know about other mercs, but I certainly don’t live the whole debauchery and devil-may-care lifestyle. We spend long stretches of time on our ship, so why shouldn’t it be nice and comfortable? I think living in a pleasant environment makes us perform better overall.”

“So that would be one of your hang-ups, Captain Hiro?”

“Yeah. There’s no point in pretending to be some kind of hardened badass.”

It was objectively better to put in wallpaper and nice flooring instead of being surrounded by bare metal. And if we had to live off the same old food cartridges day in and day out, then they should at least be delicious. Who wanted to eat bland food on purpose? Likewise, you’d obviously get better sleep in a soft, comfortable bed than a rock-hard one. *Quality sleep leads to quality work.*

* * *

“That’s how Master Hiro arranged the space for us.”

“I see. So the fact that the interior is as luxurious as a classy passenger ship is actually because of you, Miss Mimi.”

“Oh, um, I dunno about that… The *Krishna*’s interior was always nice, after all. But I do think that it was only brought to its full potential after the remodeling.”

“I was surprised the first time I got on board the *Krishna*, too.” Elma shook her head. “It’s a small craft, but the inside is as luxurious as it gets.”

Elma had always been focused on what “most mercenaries out there” did. I’d always thought I knew about the average mercenary, too, but Master Hiro had brushed off any concerns and did an expensive remodel under the philosophy that it didn’t matter as long as we could live comfortably. He really was special.

“Sorry to change the subject, but may I ask a more delicate question?” Nya asked. Her orange eyes burned with barely contained excitement.

What is it? Something private?

“Miss Mimi, are you…? No, you *are* Princess Luciada’s sister, aren’t you? I’d love to get an honest answer.”

“Ah… That’s what you wanted to ask about.”

We did look alike, after all. If we swapped clothes, nobody would be able to tell us apart except for Master Hiro.

“I’m definitely not the princess’s sister. I have no direct blood relationship with His Majesty the Emperor or the Crown Prince. They performed a genome comparison before our visit, and it was confirmed. It’s honestly a chance resemblance.”

“Really?”

“Really,” I affirmed. “The Royal Guard and court doctor came to our ship in-person to check. We were surprised by the sudden visit.”

Elma backed me up. “Yeah, we sure were. I’d been away from the capital for a while, and I hadn’t seen Princess Luciada’s debut. I only learned that Mimi was the spitting image of the princess along with the rest of the crew. We were all stunned.”

I’m not really lying. My parents, who I can barely remember, are related to His Majesty’s younger sister, Celestia, but that’s not technically a direct bloodline!

To be precise, I just barely dangled at the end of a branch of the imperial family tree. Celestia had run away from home. Genome testing had confirmed that I was almost certainly her grandchild, but there was nothing else to prove it. I was a second cousin of Princess Luciada and a grand-niece of His Majesty.

Princess Luciada and His Majesty had offered to bring me into the royal family, but I didn’t want to leave Master Hiro *or* tie him down along with me. I’d chosen to instead be a striking lookalike of Princess Luciada and nothing more.

“It really was a surprise,” I agreed. “I’m just a regular girl from a frontier colony, after all.”

“That’s awfully unlucky, isn’t it?” Nya commented. “Or…maybe it is lucky…”

“Huh, I wonder… Either way, I’m happy as things are.”

“Could you tell me about your upbringing, Miss Mimi?” Nya latched on to a new topic.

Good. I'm glad her interest was diverted. In that case, I'll tell her about how I met Master Hiro.

* * *

"Goodness… It's massive!"

"Indeed it is."

After just under a week of taking it easy, we arrived at the Kormat System trading station. A fleet of colonist ships—big ones, probably longer than the Imperial Fleet's battleships—were parked next to it. The ships were kind of mushroom-like in shape. Or maybe it was more accurate to say they were more the shape of short, stubby bullets?

"Those are the Geogate company's Heavy Double model ships. They plunge into the atmosphere just like that, and then they turn around before landing. The ships serve as a colony base after landing. Once their purpose had been served, they're dismantled and used to build new facilities."

"I hear the lower part of the hull serves as a distribution warehouse after landing. They dismantle the rest of it."

"Wow… And they've got five of them, huh? I guess that means they're setting up five colonies at once."

"And we'll be protecting and supporting them all."

"I understand protecting them, but how do we support them?" Mimi tilted her head questioningly.

Yeah, it's really not super intuitive, is it?

"Developing a newly colonized planet is a dangerous endeavor," I explained. "Sometimes, dangerous native life attacks your base, so they'll need close-range air support, just in case."

"Close what…?"

"Basically, they'll ask us to shoot the *Krishna*'s laser cannons at planetary life once in a while. Or maybe if they need any boulders or mountains leveled so settlements can spread. The last one's rarer, though."

The colonists had their own equipment, after all. They wouldn't need a spaceship for that. But they might ask for our assistance if the obstacle was particularly dangerous—like a nest of aggressive creatures, an area full of poisonous plants, or noxious gases that might be released upon destruction.

“Wow… So much goes into this.”

“Yeah. Though, pirate attacks are really the most common problem.”

Colonist ships weren’t well-armed. They could deal with the native wildlife, sure, but they wouldn’t be able to withstand pirate attacks. Planets in the early stages of colonization were easy to plunder—both the natural resources there and the colonists themselves. Isolated colonists were great targets for trafficking.

“After we resupply at the colony, the development project will begin,” I announced. “Things are gonna get busy, as usual.”

“Already giving up, Hiro?”

“Look, we’re gonna run into trouble no matter what I do. Let’s just get ready to land,” I said, dejected, as I walked to the hangar.

***

The Kormat Prime trading colony was prosperous. With the completed terraforming of Kormat III and proper colonization beginning, Kormat Prime now served as a base for raw materials that had been gathered for the colonization effort as well as food and luxury items for the colonists. Trade was ten times higher now. Before, they’d only sold ore and refined metals mined in the Kormat System. Now they were already preparing to expand the colony in anticipation of Kormat IV’s terraforming completion.

“It’s so busy here!”

“Yeah, I bet you could find a buyer for basically anything here right now, after all.”

During early colonization, *everything* was scarce. Food, medicine, household goods, construction material, you name it—all sorts of goods were brought in by endless caravans of transport ships. Everything gathered here would be loaded into the colonization ships and taken to Kormat III.

“Our first job is gonna be guarding the colonists’ ships while they land,” Elma said.

“Surely no idiot would go after them *while* they’re landing,” I replied.

Attacking ships while they were landing was a great way to mess up their entry pattern. All of the goods—and people—on board would burn to a crisp in a crash landing. Anything left would be worthless. What would be the point? You’d only do that if your goal was to interfere with Count Dalenwald’s colonization efforts—you wouldn’t stand to benefit at all otherwise.

Of course, it wasn’t a great idea either way—Count Dalenwald wouldn’t sit idly by while his people were massacred, and he had the full might of the Empire to throw around. And the Empire capturing you alive meant you could be committed to a fate worse than death.

“Now, let’s rendezvous with Chris.”

“Ooh, yeah. I’m starvin’!” Tina exclaimed.

“You ate a light lunch on purpose, didn’t you, Sis.”

“She’s got a hell of an appetite,” I said, chuckling.

“I’m not the only one!” Tina glanced at Mimi.

Hey, don’t act all innocent. Did you eat a smaller lunch just to make room for dinner, too?

Mimi looked away and quickly changed the subject. “Okay, let’s hurry! We don’t want to make our client wait!”

“Yeah, yeah…”

Mimi and Tina eagerly charged onward, leading the way to the hotel where we’d planned on meeting up with Chris.

* * *

“Here’s to the colonization of Kormat III. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Following Chris’s lead, everyone at the party raised their glasses and gulped down their drinks.

“Ah!” The two dwarves and Elma sighed in satisfaction like old men after emptying their glasses.

Incidentally, I was drinking 100 percent fruit juice instead of alcohol.

“I’ll go get some food, Master Hiro!” said Mimi.

“Get some for me, too!” Tina called after her.

“Sis, please. You could at least be a little more polite about it…”

The food was served buffet-style at the party, so everyone was free to load up their plates with whatever they wanted. Mimi and the others made a beeline for the food.

“Can’t settle down for a second, can they?” Elma joked.

“You’re one to talk Miss ‘I’m-On-My-Second-Glass-Already.’”

She ignored the comment and downed the rest in one go. Her first drink had been beer, but this one had been some kind of wine.

“Please don’t get crazy drunk,” I begged.

“Don’t worry! I’m holding back.” Well, she’d be okay. Probably. To be fair, she did drink on the daily, but she almost never got completely wasted. Tina sometimes did, though, much to Wiska’s irritation.

“Sure are a lot of people here, huh?”

“That just goes to show how many people are involved in this work.”

It wasn’t like we all had nametags, so I didn’t know who anybody was or how they were involved in the colonization effort. But one thing was clear: this venue was packed. No partygoers approached us, however, probably because of the violent auras Elma and I emanated. I wore my usual mercenary clothes. Mimi, Elma, and the twins were in their normal outfits as well, so anyone could tell at a glance that we were mercs.

“Think I’ve got the air of a mercenary now?” I asked.

“Sure do,” Elma replied. “I mean, tons of people saw your performance at the tournament, right? It was broadcast all over the Empire.”

“Aha. And here I am unarmed.” I’d left both my laser gun and my sword at the hotel, along with Mimi and Elma’s guns.

“Master,” said Mei, who’d been standing behind me.

“Hmm? Oh…”

Someone was approaching. A beautiful woman in a white military uniform flanked by her subordinates approached, glaring at me. Lieutenant Colonel Serena. I looked at the ceiling and groaned in agony. “You know, you do that every time. I’m wounded.”

“No offense intended. I’m only like this because my nightmares just came true.”

“I’m not sure you understand the meaning of ‘no offense.’”

Ha ha ha. Boy, conversation sure is tricky.

“So, the fact that you’re here means…”

“I am here to hunt pirates, as usual. Much like you.”

“Figures…”

Mei had scrounged drinks—nonalcoholic drinks, of course—from somewhere and passed them out to Serena’s group as we talked.

“Thank you,” Serena said. “So, I have a proposition.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“Why don’t you and I work together? Whenever it’s feasible to do so, at least. We know each other’s moves well by now, so I think we’d make a good team.”

“I’m not disagreeing, but we need the client’s permission before working with a unit that has a different chain of command,” I said. “Besides, the Imperial Fleet and Count Dalenwald surely have different priorities as far as who needs protecting.”

“That is certainly true. I will discuss it with Count Dalenwald directly, then.”

“You have fun with that.” I waved as Serena walked off.

To be honest, we’d probably be able to take down more pirates working together, but then I’d be less agile. On top of that, Serena’s Pirate-Hunting Unit had much more firepower than the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* combined. That difference in firepower was directly proportional to fewer total kills for our end. That meant less pay for us. Plus, the pirate ships

would be annihilated. It'd be total overkill. We wouldn't get to capture the ships, which would result in even less money.

Working with the Pirate-Hunting Unit was a lose-lose situation for us. At least in that sense.

"I'm sure Chris will refuse," Elma said.

"Absolutely."

Using us to ruthlessly mow down pirates would, in a way, be a military victory for Chris. Leaving us under the Pirate Hunting Unit's control would mean she wouldn't be able to utilize us anymore, leaving Chris with no option but to refuse Serena's request. Elma and I agreed on that.

"Man, being a noble seems like nothing but trouble," I muttered.

"No doubt about that. They have to worry about appearances with everything little thing they do."

That really meant something coming from a girl who'd run away from home in order to escape her own noble responsibilities.

"Right, well, I say we go grab some food. Can't drink on an empty stomach."

"Yeah, I need a snack with my liquor."

"Drink in moderation, please," I reminded her. "You come too, Mei."

"Yes, Master."

I stepped into the depths of the venue where the party popped the hardest, Elma and Mei in tow.

* * *

Quite a crowd had gathered around the buffet table. Apparently, the menu tonight included a lot of foods native to Kormat III.

"I hope there's nothing too weird…" I said, afraid of what I might find.

“They wouldn’t serve anything that’d upset people’s stomachs. Throwing a party that gave people food poisoning would definitely ruin their reputation.”

Yeah, fair enough. “I guess you’re right.”

Reassured, I approached the table only to find a dog-sized, caterpillar-like creature that’d been grilled whole. Brown char marks lined its white body, evidence that it’d been cooked to perfection.

I glared at Elma. She glared right back.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m sure it’s good.”

Uh… Good? You sure about that?

“Look, they’re dishing it out now. Go, go!”

“Seriously…?”

Elma pushed me toward the table where the giant caterpillar meat was being dished out. The other guests were all passing on it, probably thinking the same thing I was. With a little urging from Elma, I was the first person to take some.

W-wait, Mimi’s over there… Hey, don’t act like you can’t see me! Are you really gonna abandon me in my time of need?!

The chef cut a piece of the caterpillar, put it on a plate, and handed it to me.

“Here you go!”

“Th-thanks…”

The caterpillar’s exoskeleton and gooey insides were served on top of some kind of cracker, a green sauce alongside it.

“Mm?” The moment I put it into my mouth, a refreshing aroma pierced my nostrils. The green sauce had pleasant notes of an herb that was somewhat basil-like, and the combination of crispy exoskeleton and crunchy cracker provided a satisfying texture. A rich, cheesy flavor filled my mouth.

“I almost hate to say it, but this is really good,” I admitted.

“Isn’t it? It might look grotesque, but the flavor is exquisite,” the chef said.

“More, please.”

“Of course, sir.” The chef dished another serving onto my plate.

Mmm, so good.

Elma watched in disbelief, even though she was the one who’d forced me to try the caterpillar thing in the first place. I asked the chef for another serving and handed it to Elma.

“Whoa, it *is* good!”

“Told ya!”

Our brave taste test followed by Elma’s positive review soon emboldened other guests to try the caterpillar-and-crackers for themselves.

“If Kormat III can yield more of this, I’m sure it’ll prosper,” she said.

“Caterpillar farming? Man, I can’t imagine what these things turn into when they grow up.”

“Please stop. I just wanna enjoy some good food…”

If the larva was this big, how big were the adults? Hell, was this even larva? I was curious for sure, but I didn’t really want to open that can of worms. *Time to change the subject.*

“Colonization isn’t just about making a planet habitable for humans, is it?”

“I don’t think so. It’s important to have specialty products, right? It’s gotta help, at least.”

“Makes sense… Still, I can’t believe weird creatures like that don’t go extinct during the terraforming process.”

“Some animals adapt, others don’t. I’m sure a lot of other species went extinct.”

“Is that how it works?” *Huh. So that thing was strong enough to survive terraforming.* That wasn’t much of a surprise, given its sheer size.

Now that I thought about it, there must have been a ton of difficulties you ran into when terraforming. I figured environmental protection groups

would raise a fuss over it, but maybe the implicit threat of a noble's authority was enough to put any dissent to rest. Colonization efforts required a whole crap-ton of money, so those who stood to profit from the investment were probably able to quash those movements without lifting so much as a finger.

While I thought these innocent thoughts, Mimi and the others approached. They had caterpillar crackers, too. *You've grown strong, Mimi.*

"Mimi," I said. "I can't believe you abandoned me earlier."

"A-ah ha ha… Sorry."

"She just let you take the vanguard, hon!" Tina reassured me.

"I thought you were quite brave," Wiska added. "It's a bit much for me…" Notably, she did *not* have said dish on her plate, instead opting for a well-balanced arrangement of much more palatable-looking items.

"Wis isn't real brave when it comes to food."

"It's not good to be picky," I said.

"I guess, but…creepy-crawlies are just kind of…"

Well, I'm not about to force her. Surprisingly, though, none of the insect-based foods I'd eaten in this universe had been a miss so far. It just went to show that foods that looked off-putting didn't stick around without good reason, especially in a universe with such advanced technology.

Elma tugged on my sleeve. "Oh, here comes tonight's lady of honor."

"Hmm?" I followed her line of sight and spotted Chris, who had just entered the room. She wore a nice dress—not too fancy, with few frills and a refined, modest cut. I wasn't exactly a fashion critic, but it made her seem less girlish and more…mature.

"Good day, Captain," she greeted me. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Yes, Miss Christina. I was just sampling the local specialty," I said, shooting a glance at the half-dismantled grilled giant caterpillar. Chris shuddered slightly. It seemed the mere sight of the thing had dealt her mental damage, even when in "refined young lady" mode.

"I-I am overjoyed that you're pleased by it…"

“Sorry. Honestly,” I whispered apologetically. Chris struggled to keep a smile on her face.

I’ll just slide over and block the caterpillar from her line of sight…

The party went without a hitch. I chatted with Chris and enjoyed rare foods with Mimi the rest of the night. In the midst of all the fun, I noticed the media folk filming the party. They hadn’t actually been invited, though, so they had to pass on all the fancy foods and drinks. *Poor bastards.*

Chapter 3:
Planetary Defense

"Colonist ships one to five will now begin descending in numerical order," Mimi announced.

"I doubt we'll see pirates attacking at this point in the process, but they aren't the only dangers out there. Be on guard. Mei, raise radar range to maximum. Forget stealth; just blow 'em to smithereens."

"Understood," Mei replied. "I've raised the passive radar to maximum sensitivity, as well."

Upon my direction, she powered up both the active and passive radars to maximum capacity, closely monitoring for any ships approaching this sector. The information she gained would be processed by both her and the *Black Lotus*'s main computer while we kept watch for any threats.

There were five seats altogether in the *Krishna*'s cockpit: the main pilot's, the copilot's, the main operator's, the sub-operator's, and one additional seat. Allen, the elf from Mobius Strip, occupied that extra seat for the day.

"What do you mean, pirates aren't the only danger? Could you clarify for us?" he asked.

"Attacking during this stage is real high-risk and very low-reward, so pirates typically don't attack. After all, they won't get *anything* if their potential product burns up in the atmosphere or a colonist ship has a catastrophic crash. If someone attacks now, it's only because they want to put Count Dalenwald's time and effort to waste."

"Huh? But that's…"

"I'm not saying it's *likely*, but it would be foolish to assume they won't. Some people just want to be in the limelight, and there's always some drunkard out there looking for trouble."

The only non-pirates who'd attack right now would be rival nobles or the usual miscreants found in any society. You never knew when or where

someone willing to do something crazy just to get their name out there would show up.

"Master Hiro," Mimi called. "Do you sense anything odd about the debris above our starboard side?"

"Let's see… Huh, it's colder than the other debris around it. Thermal stealth, maybe? Mei, ping the target, just in case."

"Roger."

Pinging a target meant checking whether they were willing to communicate. I didn't know how it worked under the hood, but it was a function that sent a comms request within a very limited range. In video game terms, it was basically a target you'd locked onto. If they didn't reply, you wouldn't be at fault for assuming they were up to no good and shooting them down.

"No response," Mei said.

"Uh-huh. Deploy EML and fire for effect."

"Aye-aye. Deploying EML."

The *Black Lotus* deployed its large electromagnetic cannons and aimed at the suspicious debris Mimi had pointed out. Just then, we got a call from one of the Dalenwald family cruisers that was managing security.

"This is *Judgment One*. We noticed you've deployed your weapons and request an explanation."

"Captain Hiro of the *Black Lotus* and *Krishna* speaking. We discovered suspicious low-temperature debris. They didn't reply to a ping, and they're approaching the colonist ships' descent trajectory, so we're going to destroy it."

"Understood. We'll monitor the situation and follow up as needed."

"Roger that. Fire the EML, Mei."

"Yes, Captain. Firing EML."

There was a flash of light followed by a burst of purple electricity that literally moved faster than the eye could follow. A heat signature registered from the debris for a moment. Maybe it was trying to evade?

Either way, it was too late. The EML's shot blew the suspicious debris to bits.

"Confirmed an energy signature during the explosion," Mei said. "The debris must have been a small craft."

"Roger that. Send the data to *Judgment One*, please."

"Aye-aye."

"S-so quick to fire…" Allen shuddered.

"It's their own fault. Being in a place like this is suspicious to begin with, and they refused to answer our comms request on top of that."

In the end, we'd never know what that suspicious ship might've had planned, but it didn't matter; the answer was "nothing" now that it had been blown to bits. They couldn't have been up to anything good if they were sneaking around with thermal stealth. We could have attempted to capture them, but that would've been risky; they might have used the opportunity to attack one of the colonist ships. We'd done what was best in that situation.

"They've begun their descent," Mimi announced.

"Mimi, start recording."

"Roger!"

The colonist ships descended upon Kormat III, leaving trails of light in their wake. Seeing them all lowering as one, the barest differences in their timing and trajectories, was an incredible sight. Each of those huge ships carried around ten thousand people—so fifty thousand total—who were about to become the very first settlers of Kormat III.

"Oh, would you mind sending us your data later?" Allen asked.

"Sure, as long as Count Dalenwald gives his permission." I figured it wasn't a problem, but I'd ask the count, just in case.

"Thank you very much. What will you be doing from this point forth?"

"Typically, we'd work with the other security units to patrol the Kormat System, with an emphasis on the area near the planet. In this case, we might be asked to proactively hunt down pirates, though."

Knowing our accomplishments so far—those of the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* combined—it was likely that they'd rather use us as a guerrilla unit, flying around the star system to search for pirate bases, instead of leaving us in one spot and forgetting we were even there.

"I see…"

"Not the kind of exciting scoop you wanted, is it?"

Instead of replying, Allen just let out a dry laugh. "Ha ha ha."

You'd think so, right? Even an amateur knows it's pretty unlikely you'll stumble into space pirates just hanging around a big star system.

* * *

"Stop! Don't shoot! We surrender, we surrender!"

"I'll give you ten seconds to stop your engines and bail. If you take longer, I'll shoot. If you try to run, I'll destroy your whole cockpit. Ready? One, two, three…"

"Okay, I'm doing it! I'm doing it!" he screamed desperately. The engines stopped, and he purged his cockpit block.

Most of the time, small craft were able to detach the entire cockpit block as a sort of escape pod, just like this. Of course, the cockpit block alone wasn't capable of faster-than-light travel. It moved slowly, but it was airtight, sturdy, and equipped with minimal life support systems and basic comms equipment.

"I'll leave collecting him to you, Mei."

"Yes, Captain."

"Let's collect the loot and wreckage while we wait for her to arrive."

"Aye-aye!"

Mimi and Elma got to work piloting the recovery drones. Meanwhile, I scanned the destroyed pirate ships. Scanning them first allowed Tina and Wiska to assess what equipment was worth grabbing, which ships' wreckage to salvage, and the like.

“You’re merciless,” today’s media guest said.

“I think I heard that same line a couple days ago… Look, pirates are scum. You get the bounty whether they’re dead or alive, and it’s usually too risky to bother taking pirates to law enforcement alive. It’s basically carrying shit around in your pocket and looking for a garbage can. I usually ignore the begging and just off them, but we want to keep things nice, clean, and massacre-free for the viewers, right?”

“Ha ha ha… I appreciate your consideration.” Fomalhaut’s Zwya laughed dryly. His face was so furry that I couldn’t tell what his expression was, but he’d probably be deathly pale if he were human.

“You know what happens to the ships they attack? It’s a miracle if you get away with them only taking your cargo. Most of the time they’ll take your life as well. And sometimes, you *are* the loot. You catch my drift?”

Zwya paused, then said, “You mean black market trafficking for sex slavery or illegal human experimentation.”

“You got it. But you’re only halfway there. It’s rare for them to treat you like a ‘normal’ sex slave. There are plenty of options to get laid—you could buy a Sexdroid, or use VR, or whatever. But people who want live sex slaves? They’re the kind who’ve got real messed-up fetishes. Just remembering it makes me wanna hurl.”

I’d saved a few sex slaves by now—people who’d been subjected to their buyer’s desires. They were among the products handled by space pirates. Trafficking victims who were used as guinea pigs for human experimentation were arguably better off, though they were made to wear special collars and bracelets—some even had special chips implanted in them—that kept them from defying their new masters.

“We’re dealing with people who are more than happy to do awful things to innocent people for their own profit and pleasure. If we let them go, they’ll just hurt someone else. I always kill on sight.”

“I see.” Zwya nodded solemnly. I could only imagine his history with this stuff.

“Master Hiro, the *Black Lotus* is approaching.”

“Got it. Stay on guard for looters.”

“Aye-aye. Once we finish collecting everything, we’ll be going back, right?”

“Yep. We’ve already got plenty of cargo, after all.”

Not only did we have plenty of parts scrounged off destroyed ships, we’d also obtained the small, undamaged pirate ship that had surrendered. We had a prisoner now, too, so heading off to sell our loot and hand over the pirate was for the best.

* * *

“Small transport ships are seriously in demand right now, huh? They can’t hold as much cargo, but ships that can get from the planet’s surface to the trading colony quickly are always going to sell. Man, that really worked out for us. I can’t stop grinning.”

A buyer had been quickly found, and I watched the small, refitted transport ship (formerly a pirate ship) carried out of the hangar. *Oh yeah! Man, I really can’t stop smiling.*

Parts taken from the recovered ship carcasses had been stuffed into a relatively undamaged frame, affixed with plating lifted from *other* ship carcasses, and turned into another small transport ship, which we sold off at the colony as well. The ship’s facilities weren’t in perfect condition or anything, but if you were only going short distances—like from the surface to the colony, for example—then the most basic life support would do the job. Worst case, you could just wear a spacesuit designed for working outside of ships, and you’d do just fine. Not that I cared, since it was good and sold.

The beautiful Nyatflix rep, Nya, stood next to me as we watched the ships being hauled away. “Out of curiosity, how much did the ships sell for?” she asked.

“Let’s see, it was about 50,000 for the small one and just under 100,000 for the medium one,” I said. We’d sold one small and one medium ship today. Both had been customized into transport ships, emphasizing

speed and cargo space. “Intact generators, shield generators, and other parts sold high due to demand, too. Altogether, I think they sold for about 150,000 Ener, making a total of 300,000 Ener. Add in 320,000 Ener for the bounties, and we made a total of 620,000 Ener today.”

The Dalenwald family was also giving us a daily allowance of 300,000 Ener. This pirate hunt was three days long, so that was 900,000 Ener on its own. Grand total: 1,520,000 Ener.

Ten percent of the ship and parts sales would go to Tina and Wiska. Mimi would get 1 percent of the total rewards, and 3 percent would go to Elma. That meant my cut would be about 1,400,000 Ener. A fraction of that would go to ship maintenance costs, parking fees, food expenses, waste disposal, water, oxygen…stuff like that.

“Mr. Hiro, why don’t you treat me to a meal? I’m quite the devoted type, you know,” Nya said.

“No thanks. I’m good.” I coolly rejected her doe-eyed pleading with a chuckle. She was hot, yeah, but something was screaming that I should never, ever lay a finger on this woman.

“What a shame.” She shrugged and began walking away, so I figured the question hadn’t been serious. “But being with you seems like a lot of fun, you know… Are you sure you don’t want me? There’s no shortage of fun to be had…”

“I’m good. Really.”

Lately, I didn’t even need to say anything out loud; just *thinking* of trouble poofed it into existence. I definitely wasn’t about to add to it. Besides, there was something unsettling about the way she’d said “fun.”

“That really is a shame,” Nya said, sighing sadly.

“We’re leaving tomorrow at 13:00 hours, colony time. We’ll be out for another three days straight, so take advantage of your free time until then to stretch your legs and relax.”

“Understood. What are your plans?”

“Undecided, until this evening. I have a private dinner party tonight. *Private.* Sorry, but you’ll have to refrain from reporting on it.”

“A private dinner party, you say? How interesting…” Nya’s eyes sparkled with excitement. Her brazenness was really something else.

“Didn’t I just tell you *not* to report on it?” I said, chuckling.

* * *

I carried the twins, who’d fallen asleep in the hangar, off to their room in the *Black Lotus*. After that, I helped Mimi order replacement consumables for the ships. It was getting close to time for our appointment, so I threw a certain tipsy elf into the medical pod, woke up the still-dead-asleep dwarves, and then left the *Black Lotus*, the whole gang in tow. Well, everyone except for Mei; I’d asked her to stay. She didn’t eat, and Elma and I wouldn’t need a bodyguard. I’d just give Mei plenty of attention once we got back. *Yeah, I sure will.* It was kind of weird, but that was enough to make it up to her. Sometimes, I didn’t understand Maidroids at all.

“So we’re having a dinner party with Chris today?” Mimi confirmed.

“Yeah. We couldn’t talk much during the last one, after all.”

Chris had been managing the party as a representative of the Dalenwald family, so we hadn’t been able to talk much in front of the other guests. Tonight was different; this was a very private dinner party between friends in a classy restaurant’s private room.

“Chris is in a difficult position. Make sure you comfort her, Hiro,” Elma said.

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“Nobles have it rough…” Tina mused. “She’s so tiny, but she’s got tens, heck, hundreds of thousands of lives on her little shoulders.”

“I know I wouldn’t be able to handle it,” Wiska agreed.

I felt the same way. Chris was probably well educated on all of this, given her status, but taking responsibility for—as well as commanding—so many lives had to come with tons of pressure. *Maybe I should let her vent a little.* Or so I’d assumed…

“Hug me tighter, please.”

“Uh, okay…”

“Here, Chris, open up!”

“Aah…”

“Try this one too! It’s delicious.”

Not ten minutes later, I found myself sitting cross-legged while hugging Chris in my lap—a requirement, apparently—as Mimi and Wiska fed her pudding and cake. Elma and Tina enjoyed the show over their drinks, like the drunkards they were.

“She must’ve really been at her limit.”

“No kiddin’. Being spoiled like this must be nice, though, huh? She looked a little corpse-y before.”

Chris had arrived at our reserved room before we had, but she had *not* looked good when we found her. She had cold, dead eyes and had been lying on the floor like a corpse. That’d surprised the hell out of me. I thought she was dead, or something.

She’d stood up, slow and zombie-like, when she noticed our arrival, silently took my hand, and made me sit cross-legged before plopping down in my lap. Then, she said she wanted sweets, which brings us to now.

“Every day—every *single* day—they throw more at me. Contracts and petitions and paperwork pile up in a mountain on my desk,” Chris groaned. “Work, work, work, and more work. It never, ever, *ever* ends…”

“There, there. You don’t have to think about that right now. I’ll stroke your hair, okay?”

“Heh heh… Eh heh heh…”

“It’s actually working.” Elma laughed.

“Should we give her somethin’ to drink?” Tina asked.

“Liquor…”

“Don’t give a minor liquor!” I threw the closest thing at hand—some kind of edamame-type seed—at Tina’s forehead.

“Whoops! Still underage? I totally forgot, since she doesn’t look all that different from us.”

She might've looked like a grown-up, but that didn't make her one. Really, Tina and Wiska were the weird ones. They were dwarves, after all, so they looked young despite being the same age as me.

“You’re really struggling, huh, Chris?”

“Miss Christina… No, Chris, let us spoil you as much as we can, okay?” Wiska said soothingly as she petted the girl’s hair.

I left the hair-stroking duties to her and just hugged Chris tight. It took thirty whole minutes for her to go back to normal.

***

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Chris apologized.

“Not much point trying to keep up appearances now.”

Chris blushed, silent. Then she started slapping me repeatedly.

“Ow, ow! Jeez, I’m sorry!”

Yeah, yeah, I know. My bad for being rude, but would you stop hitting me?

“Well, to heck with it, right? Why not just spoil her yerself, hon?”

“No taking her home, now!”

Our two drunks smirked as they teased us. *Cut it out, you two. Don’t harass a minor like that.*

Now that Chris was back to normal, Mimi and Wiska had begun eating.

“Delishush…”

“Mm, it’s so perfectly cooked…”

They were in the middle of chowing down on some kind of steak. The meat was a lot like beef. Apparently, this species was going to be brought from another planet and raised on Kormat III. Why obsess over importing specialties from other planets when they could just raise the

animals and sell their meat here? *All's fair as long as you make money in the end, right?*

"You seem like you're being pushed really hard," I said. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'll be fine as long as we can get through the early development process. They say the job gets easier in time. After all, everyone involved—myself included—will improve with experience."

"That just sounds like it's getting easier because you're used to it, not because it *actually* gets any easier."

"Ha… Ha ha…" The light started to fade from Chris's eyes again.

Ookay, again, my bad for saying the wrong thing. Hey, I've got no idea what kind of egg this is, but look, Chris! Rolled omelets!

"Frankly, I don't know how we can even begin to help you with your work… But if you ever need to vent or want a bit of pampering or whatever, we're here for you."

Did she even have anyone else to turn to? Maybe not. Her parents were gone, and her grandfather, Count Dalenwald, was in a whole other star system governing his own territory. She might have one or two servants she was close to, but probably not close enough for this kind of thing. All her coworkers were her subordinates, making that inappropriate, too.

"That's all I need." Chris leaned in close to me. We might've been friends, but the fact that she'd do this in front of so many people must have meant that she was truly exhausted. "By the way, how have you all been spending the past few days?"

"Oh, same old, same old. Ambushing pirates, cornering pirates, destroying pirates. Rinse and repeat. We've downed fifty or so pirate ships in the last three days."

"That's incredible! Actually, the overall number of pirate ships taken out has been trending upward lately."

"Oh? Is it growing that much?"

"At the moment, yes."

"Huh. They must be coming in from other star systems."

Space pirates basically spawned infinitely out of nowhere to cause trouble for normal people. Except this world wasn't a game anymore, so it wasn't like they were programmed to spawn infinitely. The more you killed, the more their numbers should've decreased. The fact that the number of kills was going up meant that they had to be arriving from nearby places faster than we were destroying them.

"There might be famous pirates among them. You should be careful," I warned her.

"Careful?" Chris looked up at me. "What should I do, exactly?"

Hmm, good question.

"First, I think you should be ready to mobilize large-scale forces at any given moment. Larger groups of pirates tended to store all of their stolen goods and slaves in a base, so you'll want to be ready to attack as soon as you discover one."

"Interesting. So you think I should have enough extra mercenaries and Imperial Fleet forces available to allot to offensive purposes whenever needed."

"Pretty much. Watch how you allocate forces, though. If you couldn't defend the planet when hunting down pirates, it'd defeat the whole point."

"I see…"

"This is all advice from a merc's perspective, though. A politician might have an entirely different view of things, so the most important thing is to stay in touch with the count."

"My grandfather… Hmm…" Chris considered this for a moment, but she quickly agreed. "Okay. I'll talk to him tomorrow."

This colonization effort was a sort of test to see whether or not she was ruler material, but that didn't mean she was expected to do everything on her own. After all, the lives of everyone under Dalenwald's care were at stake here.

"It's kinda messed up to talk about work right now, don't you think?" Elma scolded me.

"Where else am I supposed to talk with Chris like this?" She was the future countess. Even as a platinum-ranker with a Gold Star, I wouldn't be

able to speak like this in public.

"Mm? Y'know, maybe you're right. But at least talk with her about something more…colorful."

"Colorful? Sorry, we haven't really been living a colorful life here lately." All we'd been doing was scouting out and killing pirates, after all.

"Speaking of, what are the media crews on your ship doing to pass the time?" Chris asked.

"Oh, them? Well…"

I told Chris about the media people, and she regaled us with all the crazy complaints she'd received. The funniest one was the single guy who'd ended up deployed in a place full of married couples and complained, "Everybody here's all lovey-dovey, and I'm alone. This sucks… Help? Please?"

* * *

After our dinner party, Chris was whisked away by the Dalenwald family's guards. When we got back to the *Black Lotus*, I was relieved to find that I'd received a message thanking me and saying that she'd gotten to her lodgings safely.

The next day, we were back to our regularly scheduled mercenary work. The *Krishna* flew on ahead through the Kormat System while the *Black Lotus* followed, collecting our spoils.

Why did we use this strategy? Listen, I'd *never* use the *Black Lotus* as pirate ship bait while the media crews were on board. The *Black Lotus*'s defensive capabilities were much higher, thanks to the military-grade battle bots, but just in case, y'know?

"Master Hiro! A distress signal!"

"That was fast."

We'd picked up the distress signal not long after leaving Kormat Prime. Apparently, pirates were attacking a relatively large passenger ship.

“Let them know we’re on our way,” I told Mimi. “Also, tell the *Black Lotus* to come with us.”

“Roger!”

I watched in my periphery as Mimi sent messages through her console as I turned the *Krishna* toward the signal’s source. *It’s pretty far. It’ll be five whole minutes till we get there.*

“No other ship is in range to make it in time,” Elma told me. “I’m gonna report the distress signal and the source’s coordinates to Kormat Prime.”

“Thanks.”

We’d likely wrap up the situation before any other help could arrive, but there might be people who needed treatment or damaged ships to tow. No reason not to get them that support.

“Rescuing a civilian ship? This sounds like a fantastic photo op!”

“Be serious…”

Nya from Nyatflix was on board the *Krishna*, already preparing her filming equipment excitedly. *I guess that’s all it is to her, huh?*

“We’ll be there soon,” I announced. “It might be a messy battle, so make sure those seat belts are on tight.”

“Aye-aye, Captain!” Nya replied.

I turned off the FTL drive. The usual boom sounded, and the stars went from lines to singular points of light again. Among them, I saw a large passenger ship, its thrusters destroyed. Two medium pirate ships were attaching to it, and more than ten smaller ships were heading our way.

“That’s what we like to see!” I promptly activated our weapons systems and began battle maneuvers.

“Two medium ships, fourteen small ones! They’re trying to board the passenger ship!” Mimi declared.

“First things first. Let’s swat down those flies! Keep an eye on the medium ships!”

“Okay!”

I faced the small ships head-on. I fired our flak cannons as we passed by one to destroy it instantly. The pirates fired lasers and multi-cannons at us in return, but it had no effect. It was basically impossible for small ships to break the *Krishna*'s shields.

I disabled flight assist and fired the attitude control thrusters to turn 180 degrees. Then, I turned flight assist back on and accelerated hard. Now, I had them from behind.

"You little—!" one pirate screamed, realizing my position. He recovered quickly, though, and promptly gave orders to his ships. "Spread out, everyone!"

Oh ho? They've got a skilled commander.

"Whoa?! My shields! Nooooo!"

However, the overwhelming difference in performance between our ships couldn't be overcome that easily. My four heavy laser cannons tore through their pathetic shields like paper. The first shot easily exhausted their shields. The second pierced through their plating and frame. And then, boom! They explode. Usually. I must've aimed particularly well this time, because the ship only lost its flight capabilities; it hadn't exploded.

"Keep your distance! Surround and kill them! Avoid one-on-one combat!" the pirate barked.

"Solid analysis," Elma said to herself.

"Maybe, but that doesn't mean they can win," I replied. If they surrounded me, I'd just break out and destroy them one by one. Their commander wasn't bad, but their movements weren't perfect. It'd be meaningless unless they worked in perfect unison.

"Sh-shit! He's too strong!"

"I can't get a solid hit on him!"

"That doesn't mean you can just run away, you idiots!"

Wait, you guys are gonna bail while your friends are in the middle of a boarding attack? If they survive and run into you guys later, they're gonna be sooo pissed.

However, they would not live to see that eventuality. I downed ship after ship, cleaning up the small pirate craft.

"St-stop! Or we'll kill everyone on that passenger ship there!" the two remaining medium ships demanded.

"Hah!" I laughed in response. "Surrender now, and maybe I'll let you live."

I typically didn't negotiate with pirates. It wasn't like they'd be able to kill everyone on board, anyway. They wanted to kidnap the passengers and sell them on the black market. They'd never willingly kill their own product. They *couldn't*.

Then again, you never knew what a cornered rat might do.

"What's the plan?" Elma asked.

"They're stopping. And I'll rip them limb from limb."

With that, I set my weapons' sights on the medium ships' main thrusters. After I took those out, I'd destroy their weapons. After that? Well, the *Black Lotus* would be here soon enough. Pirates weren't the only ones who could do boarding attacks.

* * *

Normally, it would be extremely difficult to specifically destroy a ship's individual modules, like thrusters and weapons. However, things became a lot easier when they were at a dead stop. Doubly so when they were mid-boarding. They were basically sitting ducks.

"No! Stop!"

"Why? Just because you said so?"

I quickly circled around the medium ships, which were docked onto the large ship, and used my heavy laser cannons to destroy their main thrusters. Naturally, they'd had to lower their shields in order to board the passenger ship, so they couldn't defend themselves at the moment. A few pops of my heavy laser, and their modules were as good as broken.

The frantic voices of pirates sounded through our communications. “D-damn you! We’ve got passengers here. Hostages!”

Ha ha ha! All bark and no bite. Yap all you want. Your thrusters are gone, so you’re stuck.

“Hear that? They say they’ve got hostages.” I chuckled.

Seeing my evil grin, Elma immediately played along. “Yeah, I heard them. What about it?”

Mimi looked at me in wide-eyed shock, so I put a finger to my lips, indicating to keep quiet. Nya just grinned and waited.

“So if we intervene further, you’ll kill the hostages?” I asked the pirate. “Great! Kill ’em all. That’ll raise your bounty, meaning more money for me.”

“Wha…?!”

“We’re mercs, y’know,” Elma chimed in. “Not heroes. Why would we care about hostages?”

“That doesn’t mean we’re emotionless, though,” I added. “We feel righteous indignation sometimes. And here’s the thing: we’re gonna capture you *alive*. Keep that in mind.”

“Imperial law is pretty harsh on criminals. They’re gonna love making examples out of you folks.”

“You guys are screwed either way. Things are gonna be a lot better for you if you just give up.”

“Damn yooouuu!”

Ooh, he’s mad. But I didn’t care; I continued to destroy the two ships’ weapons. Now they were naked and defenseless.

Just as I’d completed my preparations, the *Black Lotus* warped out of FTL with a boom.

“I’m sorry for making you wait, Master.”

“Perfect timing, Mei. Have our battle bots invade the pirate ships attached to that private passenger ship. Once the pirate ships are seized, have them move to the passenger ship and subdue the pirates there.”

“Understood. I will send them in with non-lethal weapons.”

“Excellent. We’ll keep an eye out for reinforcements. You command the bots. Just be sure to let Tina and Wiska know to start salvaging.”

“Aye-aye.”

Our call with the *Black Lotus* ended. Comms from the pirates had been cut off at some point, too, probably because that was an open conversation. Upon learning that battle bots were coming after them, they were likely scrambling to prep for a fight.

“Now we just watch the fireworks,” I said.

“Oh? We aren’t going to board them?” Nya, who’d been grinning silently this whole time, piped up in disappointment.

I shrugged. “We don’t know how many pirates there are on board, but two medium ships probably add up to thirty. Meanwhile, we have ten cutting-edge battle bots, even if they’re just using non-lethal weapons. There’s no reason to risk our own hides.”

“Aww… But my photo op…”

“I’m *not* risking my life so you can get some fancy pictures.”

Besides, this was why I’d spent so much money on the military-grade battle bots in the first place: to fight off pirates when they invaded our ship or others and to invade pirate ships ourselves.

I’d been through some rough training—hell, it’d made me vomit blood. That had made me a good fighter, sure, but that didn’t mean I was itching to jump into any and every battle, with or without power armor. If I could solve these problems more efficiently by spending money, then that’s what I’d do. Wouldn’t everyone?

* * *

“Get ready for battle, everybody! Here come those damn tin cans!”

Shit! That merc bastard didn’t care one bit about the hostages! Here I was, actually *about to kill everyone on board, but I’m too scared of what’ll*

happen after that. No matter what I do, I'm in for it if I get captured, but I'm not killing hostages in front of other people.

Class-B criminals, like former pirates, could get away with just doing hard labor until they died. Hell, if they were lucky, they'd be free again someday. But if we massacred innocents in broad daylight, we'd be class-A criminals for sure. Class-A criminals were basically guinea pigs stripped of all human rights. Scientists could use them however they wanted, even if it killed them, and I wasn't about that shit.

They'd hurl you out into outer space, and then toss you into a medical pod just so they could do it all over again. And that was just the beginning. The guys who had their brains fried from experimental VR were the *lucky* ones. The poor bastards used as guinea pigs for gene experimentation were some of the worst off. Let me tell ya, being kept alive all for the sake of data while you groaned in agony was nightmare fuel. I didn't want that to happen to me, no matter what.

"Invasion squad! Don't you pull any stupid shit, like killing the product! If you do, I'll turn you over to those damned scientists myself while I get off scot-free!"

A cavalcade of abuse came back through the communicator, but I didn't care. I made sure to record it all in the log. At the very least, this would help me escape the worst punishment. Suddenly, I heard something hitting my ship. It wasn't that damn merc attacking, as far as I could tell. *Wait, damage to the plating? No. That was the sound of a boarding attack pod!*

"Damn, they're here!" I pulled my worn-out laser gun out of its holster and ran out of the cockpit. *I'll rip off those tin-can soldiers' heads and turn 'em into toys!*

* * *

Mei sent out ten battle bots total, five for each ship. Occasional reports were sent back.

"Seizing control of enemy ship."

“EMP grenade attack confirmed. Damages minimal.”

“Cover. Successfully neutralized two enemy combatants.”

“Confirmed suppression of enemy ships. Preparing to enter passenger ship.”

Those of us in the *Krishna*’s cockpit had a bird’s eye view. Under Mei’s leadership, the bots efficiently neutralized the pirates en masse.

“They really overwhelmed them, didn’t they?” Mimi mused.

“I should hope so,” I replied. “Otherwise, I’d feel like I wasted the 60,000 Ener I spent on each of them.”

“But we defeated the battle bots on Sierra III easily, didn’t we?”

“Their landing pod had been shot at on the way down, so they’d taken hefty damage from lasers before they could fully power on. Besides, there was only one pod. If the bots on that landing pod had all started up properly and attacked at once, we’d have been in danger.”

“I see. Is that the difference?”

Looking back, we had consistent bad luck, but we’d never gotten the *worst* of it in any situation. Though, we were still a little too unlucky for my personal comfort.

“This is kinda easy, huh?”

“Only because I spent the money to get the equipment that’d make it easy. It’ll be a long time before it pays for itself.”

You’d typically get the bounty on a pirate’s head whether they were dead or alive, but capturing them alive got you a bonus. If you’re serious about making money by hunting pirates, things like a mothership that can bring back tons of salvage and battle bots that can invade and capture them alive will increase your revenue by leaps and bounds. You do need to invest *a lot* of money to get to that point, and it’ll take time to recoup your expenses. But I’ll make much more money like this than I ever could as a simple merc with one small ship.

“I need more photo ops!” cried Nya. “This is a civilian rescue operation, but there’s been no climactic moment! I need my climax!”

“Don’t be ridiculous! Argh, don’t lean on me from behind, either! And get your boobs off of my head! We’re in the middle of battle, idiot! I’ll throw you out into space!”

“So loud…”

“Ah ha ha…”

Girls, I can’t take my hands off the wheel, so can you please get this idiot off of me? Also, I’m never letting her in the Krishna*’s cockpit again. This isn’t a game, damn it!*

* * *

“Okay, then we’ll take these goons off your hands.”

“Thanks.”

The Imperial Fleet soldiers saluted. I waved back to them and watched as they hauled off the pirates our battle bots had subdued. Luckily, an Imperial Fleet ship had caught the passenger ship’s distress signal and had come running, so we’d taken the opportunity to hand over the captured pirates. The Imperial Fleet was also going to haul one of the captured medium pirate ships back to Kormat Prime for us, and the *Black Lotus* would haul the other. Meanwhile, we stored two ships’ worth of scrap and parts in the *Black Lotus*’s hangar.

This meant we could cobble together two medium transport ships and two small transport ships to sell. Add in the bounties and live capture bonus from the pirates as well as the reward for saving the passenger ship, and we were in for some serious cash. Once again, I could not stop grinning.

The mechanic twins watched the small ship remains being carried in excitedly. They were seriously hyped.

“Woo-hoo! I love me a challenge!”

“Let’s do our best, Sis!”

I saw that sparkle in their eyes; they must’ve loved being able to mess with spaceships, no holds barred. Getting a cut of the proceeds was probably even more motivating.

“Please have mercy… Can’t you see how bad I feel about it?” Nya begged. She kneeled in apology at my feet, but I ignored her. *Be grateful you didn’t get thrown out into space.*

“Nyatflix is out, which means it’s Fomalhaut’s turn,” I announced.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t mind if I do!” Zwya, the beastfolk from Fomalhaut Entertainment, laughed boisterously as he boarded the *Krishna*.

“Grrrrrr…” Nya growled hatefully at him. But when she realized that I was watching her, she winked flirtatiously at me, brazen as could be.

What now?

“I-I’ll repay this blunder with my body, if that’s what you want!” she begged.

“Minus five points from Nyatflix.”

“Nooo! Wait, we have points now?!”

No obvious attempt to seduce me?

The other Nyatflix staff members looked at Nya in annoyance, who continued to hurt their reputation. *I hope you remember this for a long time.* Though the fact that she could still make jokes didn’t instill much confidence in me.

“If you lose ten points altogether, you win a lovely trip into space in an escape pod.”

“Okay…” Nya slumped over sadly.

The escape pod thing was a joke, of course. But if she pulled any more funny business, I’d take the whole Nyatflix film crew back to Kormat Prime and leave them there.

“I don’t want you doing anything stupid because you think you’ll get away with it if you only do it once. Try it, and you’re out.”

“Ha ha ha, I know,” Space Dwergr’s Wamdo agreed.

“We would never do such a thing.” Mobius Ring’s Allen smiled.

Don’t think I didn’t notice you guys tensing up for a second. A captain sees all!

It hadn't been long since we'd left Kormat Prime, but we had a lot of loot, so we'd have to go back and sell it. Flying around with a full cargo hold would affect our mobility, not to mention prevent us from being able to gather more. That said, it would defeat the point if we interrupted our patrol work to immediately sell our loot, so we'd be throwing the pirate ship scraps and whatnot into a storage space we'd reserved ahead of time. Then, we'd be heading right back out.

"We'll stay here in the colony to work on refurbishin' these here ships."

"Roger that. I doubt anything will happen, but be careful, just in case."

"Yes, sir!"

The mechanic twins would stay on Kormat Prime to work on the ships we'd be selling. There wouldn't be any danger as long as they stayed put and focused on their work, so I figured it'd be fine. The port was especially safe, thanks to the Imperial Fleet and colony security keeping such a close eye on it.

"We'll stay in the colony as well and interview them, if that's okay with you," Wamdo said.

"Sure. Just don't get in their way."

"But of course."

Wamdo and his staff from Space Dwergr would be staying in the colony, then. Fomalhaut Entertainment's Zwya would board the *Krishna* while the rest of the staff from Fomalhaut, Nyatflix, and Mobius Strip would be recording on the *Black Lotus*.

After parking the *Krishna* in the *Black Lotus*'s hangar, I took a break in the lounge. There, Allen said something odd.

"You're quite occupied with your work. Or perhaps I should say diligent?"

"Hmm? You think so?"

"Yes. You're quite different from our own preconceived notions of mercenaries."

“I don’t really know what the common image of a mercenary looks like.”

I wasn’t born in this universe, so there were a lot of things I didn’t know. It wasn’t like I was slacking on learning these sorts of things, but my old world’s common sense was still burned into my mind, making it hard to get accustomed to the values and stereotypes of this universe.

“The average mercenary tends to be a person who makes a lot of money, spends it all on frivolous fun, and generally lazes about until they run out of money again.”

“That’s right. But not you, Captain Hiro. In that regard, you’re very…diligent? Stoic?”

“Diligent and stoic, huh?” I didn’t know about that. I had fun with Mimi, Elma, and Mei all the time. I ate delicious food every day, thanks to the Steel Chef. And I tended to buy things without really considering the cost.

“To put it bluntly,” said Nya, “we’d expect you to be all over those two lovely ladies all day and all night.”

“You wanna lose more points?”

“No, no! I’m just speaking from the average viewer’s perspective! Right?!” Nya shouted. She looked to Zwya and Allen, hoping for their agreement, but they just laughed dryly and brushed her off. They may not have agreed, but the fact that they didn’t openly *disagree* was proof that they’d thought the same thing.

“We’ll consider the points a joke,” I said. “But that’s what you guys are getting at, huh? If you spent all your time fooling around, you’d never bother upgrading your ship, and your senses would dull. I doubt you’d ever improve at your work.”

“That statement is impressively stoic in itself.”

“Hiro’s always striving for self-improvement” Elma chimed in.

“I just don’t want my senses dulling. I don’t wanna die, and I don’t wanna lose my crew. Lives are on the line. So why would I cut corners?” It would be one thing if I died because of my own stupid mistake, but Mimi and Elma’s lives also rested on my shoulders. That was the heavier burden to bear.

“A Platinum Rank, Gold Star mercenary truly has an entirely different mindset.”

“Eh, maybe I’m just a workaholic. Anyway, break time’s over. The *Krishna*’s lifting off soon. We gotta get back to patrolling. Mei, keep analyzing those data caches for me.”

“Yes, leave it to me.”

Chapter 4:
Odd Native Life

"So, we're not going to see anything more…rock-and-roll or something?" Zwya complained.

"What part of a routine patrol do you expect to be rock-and-roll, exactly?"

For about two hours after we left Kormat Prime, we continued our patrol work without issue. We had a certain amount of freedom in this system under Count Dalenwald's orders, but if we didn't run into any space pirates or anything, it would just be a nice little drive. We'd wiped out the entire group of pirates that had attacked the passenger ship, so we might not see any pirates in this area for a while.

"Oh, we have an urgent message from the Kormat III defense force!" Mimi piped up.

"Gah. Well, there's the rock-and-roll you wanted. That's what we get for letting you talk."

"Woo-hoo!"

"Don't cheer… So, Mimi, what do they need?"

"Umm… It seems like aggressive wildlife native to Kormat III is attacking a settlement. They want all ships capable of air raids to hurry to Kormat III and provide air support."

"Air raids?" I repeated, confused. *What a nonsensical demand.*

They might've only just started developing the area but putting out an urgent rescue request just because of an animal attack was bizarre. The colonists wouldn't have the strongest weapons—they weren't the military, after all—but they should've had laser guns and rifles at least, which were far stronger than guns that used metal bullets and gunpowder. The ship that served as their base should've had a shield generator as well as weapons like laser turrets and multi-cannons, too. Most of all, it was very odd that they weren't aware of such dangerous wildlife until now. They should've

investigated the area both before and after terraforming. You'd think that they would've discovered and dealt with it by now.

"This sounds all kind of fishy. Are we sure it came from Kormat III's defense force?" I asked.

"Um, yes. Definitely," Mimi replied.

I paused. "Double check with their HQ, just in case. And with the client, too. Oh, and make sure you record all the comms logs."

Since Zwya was on board, it would probably be best to avoid using Chris's name directly. Though, even if we hid our business relationship, anyone with a brain could figure out that we were close.

"Understood!"

"What do we do?" Elma asked.

"We can't ignore a message from the defense force's headquarters. Mimi, let Mei know that we're going to Kormat III."

"Okay!" Mimi had a lot on her plate at times like this.

Gotta say, the fact that she can handle this much work without difficulty is proof that she's a top-tier operator now. I should adjust her pay scaling again soon…

"Set route to Kormat III."

"Aye-aye, setting route," Elma replied quickly. We were already in FTL travel, so we didn't need to go through the whole startup process.

"So, Elma, what do you think?"

"Well, it is weird. Not that I'll say it can't happen." She had her doubts about that air raid request, too, then.

"Either they overlooked something, or the terraforming caused some kind of rapid mutation, huh?"

"That, or it's intentional sabotage by a third party."

"Ah, now *that's* a theory."

Intentional third-party sabotage—the possibility that someone had brought powerful biological weapons to the planet and bred them there in secret… Well, I couldn't say it was impossible. If someone wanted to

sabotage the Dalenwald family's interests, then that was absolutely an option. If this third party was exposed, that would be the end of it. But if they weren't, this would be an extremely effective means of harassment. Either way, this would prove a major hindrance to the Dalenwald family's colonization efforts if unfolding events led to heavy losses near the settlements.

"And the fact that they're not equipped to deal with it themselves means…" I shuddered.

"It's not guaranteed, but yeah. It's likely that it was orchestrated by a third party," Elma confirmed.

"Oh…"

"There's the rock, so let's get rolling!"

"I don't know the threat level yet. And make sure you cut that conversation we just had," I warned Zwya. "Unless you want to potentially get caught up in secret disputes between nobles, that is."

"Ha ha ha, of course! Rock-and-roll space battles are so much more entertaining than these dark, sticky dialogues, anyway. Though those Nyatflix folk might be interested."

Actually, yeah. Nya would be all over this.

Either way, this would be our first battle under planetary gravity in some time. If we were up against native wildlife, then it would probably be like hunting sitting ducks. I'd still have to be careful and avoid doing anything stupid, like, say, taking a nose-dive straight into the ground.

* * *

Boom! With a harsh roar, the stars that had been stretched out into lines turned back into specks once more.

"FTL travel halted. Calculating descent trajectory to the target location!" Mimi called out.

"Okay, we'll get a short break before everyone starts descending. Do we have any info on the enemy?"

“Yes, um… There. I’m putting it onscreen now.” Mimi displayed the wildlife attacking Kormat III’s settlements on the cockpit’s screen.

“Whoa, crazy. They’ve gone beyond intimidating and straight to outright evil… It’s like a mass of pure malice.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t look like a natural living thing.”

The…*thing*…displayed on the screen could only be described as sinister. It was a yellowish brown in color, and the fact that its skin was very humanlike in appearance only made it worse.

There were three different types of the creature, broadly speaking. The first was five meters tall and had more than twenty legs—each of which looked like a human leg—that it used to chase down its prey. It then used its two arms to beat it to death before gobbling it up. Its teeth were humanlike, too, which was creepy, to say the least. Its hands were covered in a sharp, rocky material that was reportedly strong enough to turn an unarmed human into mincemeat with a single blow.

The second kind also had tons of legs, but they looked more like the legs of an elephant. Its whole body was streamlined, like a ship turned upside-down. Its front was covered in the same rocky substance as the first kind, and it reportedly used it to charge and ram into things. Even laser guns and rifles were ineffective against that rocky plating. The thing was about fifteen meters long and seven meters tall, too, making it much bigger than the first kind.

It was the third kind that was the real problem. This one was smaller than the other two at only two meters tall. It lumbered around on six human-like legs. Though it didn’t move very fast or have rocky plating, it did have a built-in laser cannon as powerful as laser launchers. Their power and range definitely outclassed the laser rifles that the colonists had. Those things had enough firepower to take down seeker missiles, attack drones, and even ships without shields.

“They’ve got a whole front-line and back-line setup, huh? Are wildlife with destructive laser beams common?”

“They’re not the first bizarre life-forms we’ve seen. Remember the crystal life-forms?”

“Yeah, those sure were something, but…”

Crystal life-forms were aggressive, inorganic beings that were not only capable of interstellar travel but were also able to fire off lasers and mysterious energy beams. Still, they were indeed *life-forms*. But what I was trying to ask was whether any known habitable planet had equally powerful life on it. Being able to spit poison was one thing. Built-in lasers were clearly too much power for a single predator to wield.

"I hate to repeat myself, but it really doesn't look like a *natural* living thing," Elma said.

"For sure. Anyway, let's just kill them and be done with it."

"You're awfully flippant. Don't you feel a sense of danger?" Zwya asked.

I shrugged, not bothering to turn around. "Ten thousand, a million, whatever—they pose no threat to the *Krishna*."

"If their output is similar to a laser launcher," Elma explained, "then their range will be limited within the planet's atmosphere. The *Krishna*'s laser cannons are much stronger and have a much longer range, so we can smack them down from afar."

"Plus, we have the *Black Lotus*. We can use the *Krishna*'s observational data to fire multi-cannons and EMP cannons from the stratosphere."

Multi-cannons were often seen as little better than pea shooters, but they were extremely effective against enemies without shields. They were ship cannons that fired as fast as submachine guns. The bullets were so big that I could barely hold them, though I had no idea what their actual caliber was. If an unarmored human took one head-on, they'd be blown to smithereens in a single hit. The wildlife rampaging on this planet would be no exception.

As for the EML on the front of the *Black Lotus*, that could affect the settlements if carelessly fired at full power. The firepower—or initial velocity—could be adjusted freely, though, so Mei could probably make it work.

"I see… In other words, we have an overwhelming difference in firepower."

“Yep. I think it’ll be a one-sided massacre.”

“Our entry path has been calculated and set! I’ll show the navigation now.”

“Got it. *Black Lotus*, follow us.”

“Aye-aye.”

I followed the route Mimi had set and began the descent to Kormat III.

However, when we began descending, Zwya screamed. “Whoa?! A-are we gonna be okay?!” This must’ve been his first time entering a planet’s atmosphere.

“Yep. Entering the atmosphere is kinda scary, huh?”

The air on the other side of the shield burned red, everything shook, and the noise was intense. I knew how adiabatic compression made the air super-hot and all, but why did the other side of the shield start burning? Was it generating plasma from the heat or something?

“In the skies above the destination.”

“Ooh, there they are.”

Other battleships had already deployed and were mowing down the wildlife, which rushed forward in a swarm. The high-output battleship lasers struck the surface, blowing away the monsters as well as the earth they stood on.

People often misunderstood this, but laser cannons didn’t melt targets with their high-powered lasers. They actually vaporized what they irradiated, causing an explosion. The heat and impact were what really destroyed the target. In other words, while they were shooting at the wildlife on the surface, what they were really doing was causing a storm of explosions, heat, and destruction with their lasers.

“Activate weapons systems,” I ordered. “Reduce output to minimum to prioritize fire rate.”

“Got it. Adjusting now,” Elma replied.

“*Black Lotus*, focus on using your laser turret, too. Only use multi-cannons if the settlement is in danger.”

“Aye-aye, Master.”

Multi-cannon bullets and EML ammunition weren’t exactly cheap. Lasers didn’t use ammo, making them much easier on my wallet.

“Man, look at how many there are.”

“It’s a little gross…”

It seemed they’d already dealt with all the long-distance laser launcher ones, so the remaining targets were just the front-liners and the chargers. This would be a total massacre. Those landlubbers couldn’t touch us from all the way down there. All we’d have to do was make sure the settlement’s shield didn’t get destroyed.

Of my four heavy laser cannons, I had the lower two aimed at the wildlife approaching the settlement and the upper two aimed at the further ones. Using minimum output meant the fire rate was faster and laser irradiation lasted longer, making mob clean-up a breeze.

“Well, at least the locals will have plenty of food after this,” Elma remarked.

“Huh?” Mimi and I gasped in unison.

What?! They’ll EAT those?!

“They’re obviously organic life-forms. I imagine you can probably break them down into protein.”

“Ew, nasty.”

“What do you think they taste like?” Mimi pondered.

“Huh?” I stared at her in astonishment.

“What?” She stared back at me, just as surprised.

Um… Isn’t she repulsed by how they look? Did her culinary curiosity win out?

“I-I mean, they might actually turn out to taste good!” she stammered.

“S-sure… Right.”

The ones on the front line looked clearly humanoid, though, so I had zero appetite for them. Mimi’s mission *was* to sample all the food the

galaxy had to offer, though. Her mental fortitude was, uh…commendable. Sure. Let's go with that. *Me? No. I'll pass.*

* * *

Our job done, we immediately began our ascent through Kormat III's atmosphere.

"So, when things are over, you just go right back out into space?" Zwya murmured.

"Well, yeah. We're mercenaries, so…" I trailed off.

"Shooting stuff from our ship is our main thing," Elma added. "Intelligence and intrigue are outside our field of expertise."

"No point in using a chainsaw or an axe for surgery, is there?"

After overwhelming the clearly unnatural "wildlife," we'd found weird surface structures that seemed to be their nests and obliterated them with the *Black Lotus*'s EML and other guns. At this point, the Imperial Fleet's heavily armed soldiers were probably searching the nest exhaustively.

"But aren't you curious? They obviously weren't real indigenous wildlife."

"Well, yeah, of course I'm curious, but it's not my jurisdiction. I can help if they need more firepower after the investigation, but there's no point trying to assist with things I know nothing about. I'd be a lot more helpful chasing pirates around. It's better for us, too."

"Because we make more money that way!" Mimi piped up excitedly.

"Exactly!" I shot her a thumbs-up.

"Are you two really okay with this?" Zwya said, worried.

That was just how mercenary work went. The *Krishna*, the *Black Lotus*, and I were all strong, and Mimi and Elma were fantastic crew members, but that didn't mean we could do everything.

“You need the right people in the right places, so everyone can do what they’re best at. Nothing good comes from us sticking our noses into other people’s business just for the hell of it.”

“I see.” Zwya seemed convinced.

In truth, sticking our noses into matters that didn’t involve us would only make our bad luck shift to high gear. We’d definitely be dragged into something awful. I didn’t need any more trouble in my life. I had enough of that as it was.

“Besides, at times like thi—”

My words were interrupted by Mei’s voice echoing in the cockpit. “Master, a report,” Mei said.

“What’s up? Oh, did you finish reading the data caches?”

During the pirate’s boarding attack, we’d captured two ships that were basically undamaged aside from their weapons and thrusters. The bot ambush had thrown them off-guard, so they hadn’t destroyed or erased the contents of their data caches or black boxes. As a result, Mei had gotten busy analyzing them.

“Yes. I now have the location of their hideout as well as data on their dealings.”

“Fantastic. Then we’ll sell the location data to the Imperial Fleet,” I said. “Or should we report it to Chris first, maybe?”

“Yes, I believe that would be best. Miss Christina will be able to put Imperial Fleet forces to work much faster and more efficiently than we can. Also, I learned something else from the data…”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“It seems someone is funding and equipping these pirates in order to sabotage Count Dalenwald’s current colonization efforts. The flow of money and supplies is far too great for run-of-the-mill pirates.”

“Aha… Let’s discuss that with Chris, too. I’ll leave the arrangements to you.”

“Yes, Master. I will see it done.”

The call from the *Black Lotus*, which currently held Mei and the rest of the media staff, ended. The *Krishna* also happened to finish leaving the atmosphere at this point. Now that I had a moment to breathe, I turned to face Zwya, who sat in the sub-seat at the back of the cockpit.

"*As I was saying*, at times like this, trouble usually comes our way without us needing to stick our necks out. Fun, right?"

"So much fun," Zwya smiled. "Though I'd never wish for such bad luck myself."

"Hey, at least you'd never run out of stories."

When I walked down the street, I ran into pretty girls. When I went into space, I picked up distress signals and had to save passenger ships from pirates. When I landed on colonies, I'd have to fight weirdo mutant life-forms in my power armor. When I fought pirates and dug around in their loot, I picked up more pretty girls. When I went on vacation, the planet would get attacked by pirates. When I guarded noble ships, I got caught up in disputes between nobles. When I went to buy a ship, I ended up with two cute dwarf girls. When I completed a transport request as a trial run, I ended up in a war between the Imperial Fleet and crystal life-forms. And when I went to the capital to get my award, I ended up in a stupid tournament.

Basically, I had the shittiest luck a guy could have!

"I'm just a normal guy. I don't have enough life in me to survive all this trouble," Zwya joked.

"Right…"

"Right?"

"Right."

All three of us expressed our heartfelt agreement. I may've been larger than life in the eyes of many, but I was still a normal guy in the end.

* * *

Chris made a swift decision after receiving word from Mei. She quickly contacted the Imperial Fleet in secret and mustered their elites as

well as the Dalenwald family's personal army in order to obliterate the pirate hideout.

People often moved in secret when it came to raiding these pirate hideouts. Why? Well, the pirates would run away if you made it public knowledge that you were planning to attack them. Their eyes and ears often extended to nearby colonies, thanks to the pirates' paying people for information.

"That's why you need to be careful if you're planning to raid a pirate hideout," I explained.

"Which is why we can't leave your ship, either?"

"Exactly. If I let you off and you started leaking info, it'd be a disaster."

"Does she not trust us?"

Allen and Nya had a barrage of questions for me.

"There are plenty of ways to drag info out of someone even when they don't feel like sharing," Elma cut in. "Anyway, it's only for two days."

The *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* were standing by at Kormat Prime until we were given the order to launch. It'd take time to renovate and sell off those captured pirate ships anyway, so that was convenient enough for us.

"Cleanin' the inside is even harder than the repairs…"

"Just filthy… I can't stand it."

I'd had a short conversation with the twins last night. Poor clean-freak Wiska looked traumatized. According to her, the pirate ships' interiors were disgusting. Apparently, they were so bad that it'd be faster to replace the whole interior than to clean it.

"Your ship's sparkling clean compared to theirs, hon. I like that a lot better."

"It's bigger, brighter, cleaner, and it has such good food…"

I'd told them not to push themselves too much, but they had their hands full trying to repair the two medium ships. They'd wake up, go to work early, come back late, shower, and go right back to bed. The battle bots could assist, if given the right equipment, so I'd sent both them and the

Black Lotus's maintenance bots to help Tina and Wiska. They'd be great bodyguards, too.

Incidentally, we *had* let the two dwarves off the ship. Since they didn't know about the pirate hideout in the first place, there was no risk of a leak. I'd just told them that we would be waiting here for a while for the sake of rest and letting them work. It did feel like they were pushing themselves harder than usual because of that, though, so I planned on asking Elma to scrounge up some good liquor for them.

"Being a mercenary isn't an easy job, I see. There are so many factors to consider."

"Yeah. I'd imagined a lot more killing pirates, spending money, and having fun."

Wamdo and Zwya sounded equal parts impressed and disappointed, but I ignored them.

"You would imagine that, wouldn't you? I have to agree."

"Yep. That's how it normally works."

"This normal for us."

Mimi and Elma agreed with them, but once again, I ignored their banter. Here I was, thinking I was just following my dreams, and they kept calling me boring and stoic. What the hell were mercenaries in this universe *like*, exactly? With all the crap I kept getting, I had to wonder.

While everyone bullied me, Mei alone took my side. "I think my master's lifestyle is quite admirable."

That's my Mei! I'll have her heal my poor broken heart later and cry right into her chest. Part of me felt like I was falling for her schemes—or maybe the wiles of machine intelligence—but I figured nothing bad would happen if I let her spoil me, even knowing that. *Probably.*

Thus, we spent a few days waiting on the *Black Lotus* for Chris and the Imperial Fleet to finish their preparations. And during this time, we mustered our courage for the upcoming pirate hideout raid.

* * *

Wamdo sat in the back of the cockpit on the day of the raid. “Now this looks like a good photo opportunity,” he murmured happily.

He’d probably have a spectacular view. The headquarters of pirates who’d tried to ravage the star system were about to be squashed by a joint force made up of the star system’s own army, the Imperial Fleet, and mercenaries. And us heroes were about to destroy those evil space pirates. What footage could be better than that?

“So, you’re with us today, huh?”

“Yes. We let other companies have their turns up until now, after all.” He flashed a friendly smile, but I could see through him. He’d wormed his way onto the *Krishna* on just the right day—or maybe he’d been planning this from the start. If I was right, then he was a lot more cunning than he looked.

“How will you proceed with the attack on the pirate hideout?”

“Basically, the military battleships and cruisers will get a jump on them with their bigger guns. They’ll destroy core facilities, like their hangars and docks, making it impossible for the pirates to escape. A lot of them won’t be parked in those places, though, so they’ll scatter and try to flee.”

“Go on.”

“That’s where us mercenaries come in. We’re fast and light on our feet, so we’ll hide along the pirates’ expected escape routes and hunt them down while they try to scram. We’re kind of like hunting dogs.”

“I see. You leave the face-to-face fighting with the military while you encircle and pursue them.” Wamdo listened closely, having his photography drones take pictures of the cockpit and recording our conversation all the while. He’d probably stitch this all together into a documentary later.

“It’s been so long since our last hideout raid!” Mimi piped up.

“Feels like a festival, right?” I joked. We’d even get to watch a fireworks show when we blew the pirate ships to pieces. “Mei, are you ready over there?”

“Yes, Master. My preparations are complete.”

The *Black Lotus*, carrying the other media staff on board, was going to bombard them alongside the Imperial Fleet this time. The large EML on the front of the ship was stronger than *and* had more range than the Imperial Fleet's main guns, after all. Despite their strength, EMLs were slower and harder to use than laser cannons, which prevented the Imperial Fleet from adopting them.

"We're working separately today, so be careful," I warned Mei.

"I would think that should be my line," she replied.

Fair. Mei had the Imperial Fleet, this star system's army, and Count Dalenwald's private army at her side, but we were alone in a small ship in a close-quarters battle with pirates.

"All right, then pray for our safety."

"Yes, I shall. Good luck in your efforts, and please return safely."

"Thanks. You, too."

Who do androids pray to, anyway? It doesn't seem like they pray to any god. Actually, they could believe in gods and miracles and stuff, I guess. The fact that they've evolved from basic computer programs to sentient machine intelligence is the result of successive miracles itself, after all.

We were briefed while we waited. The mission was exactly as I'd explained to Wamdo; there were no noteworthy additions. Basically, it was standard procedure. That was just how standard procedure, template strategies, and the like worked. Of course, you did need flexibility when the situation called for it, but going into a fight while following procedure was most effective, unless something crazy happened. That was especially true when you were the ones with overwhelming force. I had to be more creative and quick-witted when fighting several enemies on my own, but this was an entirely different situation.

When the briefing ended, Chris appeared on the cockpit screen.

"This operation is for the sake of protecting not only the residents of the Kormat System, but every imperial citizen in every neighboring system, as well as travelers."

I thought she was going to give a speech, but if she was, she sure was making odd statements.

"The Dalenwald family stands to benefit quite a lot, but make no mistake: your efforts here will safeguard innocent lives and the futures of many. Imperial soldiers will receive military honors. Mercenaries will be paid an additional reward on top of the bounties on the individual pirates' heads…"

A smile blossomed across her face like a lily of the valley—beautiful, delicate, full of poison—giving only the tiniest glimpse of the danger within.

"For the sake of our shared fortune, go and scatter those pirates. I eagerly await your results."

* * *

Sent off into battle by Chris's lovely yet dangerous smile, we arrived at our designated sector and hid behind an asteroid. I lowered engine output and life support systems to minimum to maintain stealth.

"Oh my lord, Miss Christina's speech gave me chills!" Wamdo exclaimed in a hushed tone.

"You don't have to whisper about it," I groaned. "Actually, do we really have to talk about it right now at all?"

"Giving chills" had probably been Chris's intent. And there was no need to keep our voices down just because we were in stealth mode. No matter how loud we yelled, our voices wouldn't travel beyond the *Krishna*'s walls. And even if they did, we were surrounded by outer space regardless.

Mimi and Elma grinned wryly at the innocent Chris's sudden change.

"Ah ha ha… Chris—um, Miss Christina—is a noble, after all."

"Yeah, it seems like she's doing pretty well, in more ways than one."

They say kids grow up fast, but maybe girls these days mature even faster.

“Not much longer until the operation begins. Everyone, prepare for battle.” I looked over the group, urging them to focus. “Try not to bite your tongue, piss yourself, or throw up, or anything, Wamdo.”

“Ha ha ha. I even snuck on a diaper, just in case… I’ll do my best.”

Someone throwing up in the middle of a battle in an enclosed space like this would be the worst thing ever. We’d have to keep fighting through the stench, at least until the battle was over. And it’d be the worst to clean, too. *Hard pass, thanks.*

“Diapers are essential equipment for new riders. Isn’t that right?” I said, voice even. I gazed straight at the panels in front of me, not giving Mimi even the teeniest glance.

I feel like someone’s glaring daggers at the back-left side of my head… Nah, I must be imagining it. I mean, I was just saying that as, like, a general rule, y’know? You’ve graduated from the diaper, Mimi, so there’s nothing to get worked up about. It’s all gravy.

“Okay. Ahem. So, anyway…it’s time! L-let’s goooo!”

“You’re awfully relaxed right before a battle… Changing engine output to combat mode. Rebooting all systems.”

“Mmgh… Sensors and radar systems active. Ready any time.”

“Ha ha ha, it’s finally time! Let’s kick things off.”

Just as we charged out from behind the asteroid, laser cannon fire struck the pirate hideout. I couldn’t see through the harsh light and powerful explosions, but it was probably safe to assume the *Black Lotus* was bombarding the pirate hideout—a large, modified asteroid—right about now.

“Let’s go make some money, ladies.”

“Aye-aye!” Mimi and Elma replied.

I raised thruster output to maximum and rushed toward the battlefield.

Time for a rare, large-scale battle. Let’s wreck ’em.

* * *

“Two o’ clock, above us! Three enemy craft!” Mimi called.

“Take’em out,” I ordered.

“Aye-aye,” Elma said, at the ready. “Weapons systems standing by.”

Three pirate ships hadn't noticed us and tried to escape. I fired the heavy laser cannons at the one in front. Four spears of light struck through the ship's underbelly but didn't pierce through. They'd been blocked by the pirates' shields.

"Good equipment."

"Their shields are decent, at least."

"Gah?! E-enemies!" The pirate screamed.

I fired once more. The lasers pierced his shields, plating, and hull this time, causing his ship to fall apart.

"D-did you just…kill him?" Wamdo asked, clearly frightened.

"Sure did," I answered bluntly.

I fired another volley at one of the remaining two ships, which took evasive maneuvers. Again, my lasers were blocked. Fortunately, their panic made their actions easy to read. No matter how much they accelerated, flying in a straight line wouldn't get them anywhere.

"N-nooo!" Another round of bloody fireworks went off.

"St-stop! I surrender! I surrender!" the last pirate begged as he detached his cockpit block to bail out. It couldn't be reconnected unless he was brought to a maintenance dock, so at the very least, he'd lost his combat capabilities.

"Mimi, tag him for me."

"Understood!" Mimi used her console to put electronic tags on the bailed-out cockpit block and barely damaged spaceship. I normally didn't bother with this function, but claiming ownership rights was important in big battles like this one.

"Next."

"Okay! Several signals below us at nine o' clock. Allies are there, too. They're in the midst of battle right now."

I steered in the direction Mimi indicated until the unfolding battle was before us.

"They're losing," Elma pointed out.

“There are a ton of pirates, and they look really well-equipped to boot. I think I just saw an ion blaster shot.”

“That’s annoying.”

Ion blasters were a support weapon with high shield attrition but dealt extremely low damage to plating and hulls. They were more expensive than the more widely available laser cannons and multi-cannons. And sure, their flight speed was even slower than multi-cannons, but an ion blaster’s effects were incredible. If your enemy had ion blasters, you’d find yourself without a shield and taking heavy damage in no time. It was a real wicked weapon, to be sure.

“This is the *Krishna*,” I informed the people on our side. “I’m gonna join the party, if you don’t mind.”

“Please do! These guys have weirdly good equipment! Be careful!”

“Roger that,” I replied, jumping into the fray.

First, I set my sights on the one with the ion blaster. Skilled users liked to jump right into the fray and fire their ion blasters and multi-cannons from point-blank range, but inexperienced ion blaster wielders often stayed at a safer distance to try to take aim. *Yep, that describes this guy to a T.*

“Whoa! Don’t come any clo—”

“One.”

I fired both large flak cannons right as I passed by, destroying shields and ship alike. Flak cannons were a very situational weapon, but if you struck at extremely close range, you could basically ignore shields and deal massive damage to the plating and hull of the ship. They were perfect for intense melees, like this one.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Eep!”

I thought I heard Wamdo squealing in fear behind me, but I didn’t have time to pay attention to him. *Ooh, that enemy ship is on a trajectory to graze us. Go on, take some complementary flak on your way. Don’t be shy.*

“That four-armed one is trouble! Aim for him!”

“Let’s crush him!”

“Ha ha ha, funny joke.”

Them coming straight for me actually made things more convenient. I focused my fire straight ahead, breaking through their incomplete encirclement with ease before turning the ship around. Then, I fought them head-on while they pursued me. No matter how good their equipment, they were still just pirates. As long as I kept an eye out for ion blasters and seeker missiles, they weren't scary at all.

"Wh-what's with this guy?! Why can't I hit him?!"

"You gotta be hitting him! Just keep pushing!"

The pirate was right. They *were* hitting me. Dodging laser cannon shots was hard, and when they fired a thick enough barrage of multi-cannon shots, some would be unavoidable. But a couple of hits wouldn't get through the *Krishna*'s triple layer shields as long as I didn't let the real shield-killers—the aforementioned ion blasters and seeker missiles—touch me.

And now that I had attracted so much attention…

"Hah! Your flank's wide open!"

"Don't get too comfy, bud!"

The mercenaries who'd been overwhelmed a few minutes ago regained their vigor and ripped through the pirates who'd focused their attention on me. The mercs focused on the most threatening ships first, immediately honing in on the ones with ion blasters and seeker missiles. I didn't have to say a word.

"D-damn it! Why?!"

"H-hey, don't run away!"

Realizing that they were now at a disadvantage, the frightened pirates scrambled for an escape. Of course, being mercs, we weren't going to just sit around and watch them take off. Us mercs crushed pirates, even when they tried to escape. That's our job.

"Yeehaw! Time to chase some rats!" I called through comms. "First come, first served, boys!"

"C'mon, don't think you'll get away that easily!"

“Ha ha ha! Shakin’ your ass for me, huh? Don’t run away, now! Your loot and your life are mine!”

When pirates turned tail and ran, they became little more than delicious prey for us mercenaries to hunt down.

“Sometimes, it’s hard to tell which of you are the pirates…” Wamdo muttered.

“Ah ha ha…” Mimi chuckled wryly in response.

How rude. I think we’re exemplary mercenaries.

* * *

Due to the unexpectedly high quality of the pirates’ equipment, there were some losses among the mercenaries and soldiers, but the battle was a success overall. Or at least, this phase was. The combined armies would send foot soldiers into the base and clean up the inside next.

As for us, we were salvaging scrap from the battlefield. In other words, we were looting the defeated pirate ships. Pirates tended to leave with some real valuable stuff in their ships when you attacked their bases.

“Why is that?” Wamdo asked.

“Well, they’re trying to get as many valuables and assets off their base as possible, y’know? No matter how secret your secret base is, info still gets leaked. They’re always ready to flee at a moment’s notice,” I said, fishing through the loot.

On top of the usual food cartridges, potable water, alcohol, medical supplies, drugs, and Rare Metal, they also had sellable materials, high-tech goods, and people in cold sleep pods—probably illegal slaves.

“Now, this is a lot… Good grief.”

The Kormat System had a lot of pirates hunting for illegal slaves. That much was to be expected, but this was still a pain to deal with. The Grakkan Empire and the Dalenwald family would probably take in and look after the illegal slaves and other kidnapped folk in this case.

Incidentally, I'd already handed over the whole bailed-out cockpit block from that one guy's ship. I didn't know what fate they would meet, but maybe they'd be reborn and live as good, kind people in their next lives.

"The main source of revenue for mercs are bounties on space pirates, but you can't underestimate how much you'll make from off their loot. Hell, now that we have a mothership, we probably make more from loot than we do from the actual bounties."

"Incidentally, what were your combat results this time?" Wamdo asked me.

"Uh… Mimi?"

"Forty-two small ships and eight medium ships. Exactly fifty in total."

"We didn't get as many as expected this time," Elma commented, "thanks to the pirates being well-equipped."

"We'll make up for it with the loot."

"Fifty ships… That is truly awe-inspiring," Wamdo mused, clearly impressed.

Incidentally, this operation's rewards were 5,000 Ener per small ship and 20,000 per medium ship. That put us at 370,000 Ener for today, not counting each individual pirate ship's bounty. We'd also get to sell off the loot, salvaged equipment, and any ships we refurbished. I didn't know what that would all add up to yet, but we were making a killing here! I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

"It's great to see Master Hiro having fun," Mimi said.

"He's no penny-pincher, but he sure does love his money," Elma agreed.

"Isn't it just great to see your blood, sweat, and tears literally pay off?" I replied.

"So would you say that mercenary work is rewarding?"

"Rewarding, huh? Guess so."

"Yeah. We're Hiro's employees, so we don't get bounties directly, but we still make good money."

“About how much, if I may ask?” Wamdo said hesitantly.

“I get 1 percent of our total revenue,” Mimi said. “Elma gets 3 percent.”

“That…seems rather low, no?” Wamdo tilted his head questioningly. Yeah, 1 to 3 percent of our total revenue did sound cheap. Especially since they were putting their lives on the line.

“I can’t say for certain yet, because I don’t know final profits, but I’m pretty sure my cut from this will be over 100,000 Ener,” Elma replied.

“I think I’ll get more than 30,000 Ener. And that’s just from today!”

Hearing their estimated figures, Wamdo shook his head and massaged his brow. “Ah, now I see. The world of mercenaries is truly one beyond my imagination. By the way, what do you spend your earnings on?”

“Buying tasty drinks and stuff.”

“Eating delicious food. Things like that.”

“Well, sure. But what about clothes, jewelry…?”

“Hmm… If Hiro wanted me to, I guess I could give it some thought.”

“He already buys us everything we need, really, so…”

Indeed, if I wanted Elma or Mimi to wear something, then I’d buy it for them myself. I also bought accessories as needed. Not that they’d get to wear fancy jewelry too often, since we had to be ready for battle. Jewelry and other accessories falling off and flying around the cockpit would be both annoying and dangerous.

“…As expected of a man with two girlfriends, I suppose.”

“Yeah.” Elma smiled gently.

“That’s Master Hiro for you.” Mimi smirked for some reason.

Yeah, okay, when you guys put it so bluntly, it’s legit embarrassing. Also, why did you two stop collecting loot? Get back to work! Chop chop!

***

I was collecting ship parts that sold well, despite my disinterest in them—ion blasters, surprisingly powerful shield generators often used by newbie and middling mercenaries, and the like—when Mimi frowned and began fervently tapping at the console.

"What's the matter?" I asked her.

"Um, I don't quite know yet… The Imperial Fleet and the star system army currently clearing the hideout seem to be in an uproar over something."

"What is it? Are the space pirates doing something weird?"

"Like using a Singing Crystal?"

"That's a little too crazy…" Elma sighed. "But maybe they did mount an unexpected counter-offensive."

"Either way, we already have full control over this sector. Even if they win at hand-to-hand combat, we can turn the whole thing into space debris, right?"

Even if the pirates managed to defeat three combined armies in hand-to-hand combat, there was no way for them to get out of this predicament as long as we controlled the sector. They couldn't escape, and they couldn't destroy the overwhelming forces encircling them. This was why pirates *normally* surrender quickly at this point and put an end to the conflict.

"It seems they're obstinate. Some of them are resisting," Mimi said. "We have a surprising number of casualties already."

"Huh? How the hell are they beating trained Imperial Fleet soldiers in power armor and armed to the teeth?" I paused. "Oh."

"Did you figure something out?" Elma asked me.

"I mean… Is that even possible?"

"We can't say it isn't without seeing for ourselves."

It seemed like we'd arrived at the same conclusion. Mimi and Wamdo, on the other hand, only looked confused by our unspoken understanding.

“Not many can stand up to the Imperial Fleet’s soldiers,” I explained. “But I bet you can think of the exact sort of thing that can tear through power armor like paper, deflect lasers fired at them, and even reflect them back at the shooter.”

“Huh?” Mimi looked surprised. “Th-that means…”

“An opposing noble faction? Sword supremacists, maybe…?” Wamdo asked.

“We don’t know that for sure,” Elma said. “Maybe some of those monsters from Kormat III just so happened to be rampaging in there.”

“Even highly trained soldiers would find fighting those backbreaking…” And literally, at that. Power armor might be able to stand up to one shot… No, maybe not even that much. Those things were pretty big, but maybe…just maybe… I continued collecting loot as I pondered this until I saw a corner of the pirate hideout light up. “Is it just me, or—”

Before I could finish my sentence, the *Krishna* picked up something rushing out of the base and coming toward us like a bat out of hell. Mimi reacted quickly.

“Something… No, a suppression ship is approaching, and fast!”

“I’m gonna lose it,” I said, groaning. My mood soured. I wouldn’t be surprised if I were literally emitting some kinda dark aura.

“Now, now…” Elma did her best to calm me down.

Allow me to explain! Suppression ships had super-powerful propulsion engines that outpaced the *Krishna*. They were equipped with such sturdy shields that even our fancy weapons couldn’t make a dent in them. They also had a single weapon, a ramming horn, that nullified enemy shields and pierced through their hull. It was the Imperial Fleet’s most insane weapon, for sure! It’d been developed based on one absolutely unhinged idea: ram your target, and then send noble swordfighters onboard to do a little murder. I seriously had to wonder if the developers, approvers, *and* builders were all taking some serious crazy pills.

Either way, I decided to ignore it because it had nothing to do with my money. So of course, that was when Lieutenant Colonel Serena called out over wide-field comms and ordered, “Captain Hiro! Stop them!”

Uh…

"Oookay, *Krishna* speaking. You want me to destroy it, right?"

"Absolutely not! Capture them alive!"

"You think I'm some kinda miracle worker or something?"

She was clearly asking *way* too much of us. Capture the ship? It was faster than the *Krishna* and had thick shields to boot. Rob it of its movement capabilities without the total destruction part? Okay, maybe—*just maybe*—I could destroy it, if I pounded it with heavy lasers, fired a wave of flak at it as it passed, *and* used anti-ship reactive torpedoes.

"Just stop it! If you can't, then pursue as long as you can!"

"You gotta be kidding me…"

"Ridiculous, as usual." Elma chuckled.

"Yeah…" Mimi sighed.

"So this is your legendary ability to attract trouble?"

"Shut up! I may have already given up, but I'll never give in! I refuse to accept that as fact!" Whatever, we had to stop that stupid suppression ship somehow. *Without* destroying it.

"You can do it, Mr. Platinum-Rank Mercenary. Or do you mean to say that you can't?" Serena taunted.

"I-I believe in myself too!"

"Hiro makes himself look really stupid sometimes…"

"I think he's just letting her provoke him into desperation," Mimi replied quietly.

Thank you! At least somebody here gets me. When people taunt me like that, I have no choice but to play along. I fear no suppression ship! I'm gonna hunt you down and crush you!

* * *

"So, they escaped in the end."

"Yes, ma'am."

We couldn't beat the suppression ship's shields or speed. Well, to be fair, we're in FTL drive trying to trail it as we speak. Suppression ships have FTL drive, but they don't have hyperdrive, so they shouldn't be able to escape the Kormat System. At least that's something.

"We're still following them, so…"

"A lone suppression ship can't travel far, and interstellar travel is off the table. They'll have to stop somewhere to resupply or try to find ships. Imperial Fleet scouts are on their way so please continue pursuit."

"Aye-aye," I replied with a salute. Lieutenant Colonel Serena nodded once, then hung up.

"Well, it's her fault. She's the one asking the impossible," Elma shrugged.

"Definitely," Mimi agreed.

It would be one thing if she'd asked me to destroy it, but it was totally insane to think I could stop a suppression ship at top speed. My heavy laser cannons couldn't get through its shield, and while my flak might nullify its shields to an extent, it would be impossible to destroy its propulsion system alone. I doubted anti-ship reactive torpedoes had any chance of hitting it either. Even if they did, the whole thing would go kablooey without leaving so much as a trace. There wouldn't be anything left for us to capture.

“I see we’ve left the *Black Lotus* behind, too.”

“Even that thing can’t keep up with the *Krishna* going at full speed. Still, we’re just following them, so there’s no real danger. The *Black Lotus*’ll follow when she finishes collecting loot.”

As long as we were in the same star system, the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus* could track each other no matter the distance. Apparently, it had something to do with some intrasystem information network thing, but I didn’t know the details. It’s basically a party feature in *Stella Online*.

“So, this route… Are we going toward Kormat IV right now?” I asked.

“Looks like it,” Elma answered.

“Our trajectory is perfectly aligned with the orbital path of Kormat IV. Do you think they’re planning to land?”

“I have a very bad feeling about this. I wish we could stop them before they land, but…”

If they were going toward Kormat Prime, we could expect that they were planning on changing ships. But if they were headed to Kormat IV, a planet still being terraformed? I had nothing but bad feelings about it.

Planets undergoing terraforming had extremely inhospitable environments during the process. The environment was being changed from totally inhospitable to something a little more life-friendly, after all. Bizarre natural disasters were no doubt happening all over the planet at this very moment.

“Hiro…”

“Master Hiro…”

“Hmm? Oh. Crap.”

Damn it! I let my guard down! I jinxed it! I wished we’d stop them before they land! Please, no! I really don’t wanna land on a planet in the middle of terraforming! Forgive me, girls!

* * *

“W-well, it’s not like we have to chase them down once we’re there, right?!”

“I hope not…”

“Ah ha ha… Well, I’ve marked their descent point.”

Naturally, we didn’t beat them to Kormat IV. By the time we’d arrived, the suppression ship had already begun landing. Destroying their propulsion systems at this point would just turn their landing into a crash landing. Since we were told not to destroy them, our hands were pretty much tied.

However, the *Krishna* was a small ship capable of interstellar travel. It was equipped with all kinds of powerful sensors, so it was easy to precisely calculate their landing point from low orbit. As such, we marked their precise landing point and remained in low orbit around Kormat IV, effectively keeping them stuck on the planet’s surface.

“I understand that planets mid-terraforming are extremely dangerous,” Wamdo said. “Why are we staying here?”

“If they switch ships to something capable of interstellar travel and try to run, we can attack the instant they try to escape the planet’s atmosphere,” I explained.

Thanks to gravity, even the most advanced spaceships couldn’t hope to simply launch directly upward if they wanted to escape the atmosphere. They wouldn’t be able to perform evasive maneuvers while doing so, either, leaving them defenseless. If their new vessel was a smaller craft, targeting their propulsion systems would be easy.

“It’s hard to get into space when your orbital path is blocked. If you control space, then you control the fight. That’s why every interstellar nation puts so much effort into maintaining their space fleets.”

Even the strongest fortress with the strongest soldiers, tanks, ships, and aerial weapons couldn’t stop orbital bombardment if they were stuck planet-side. Fundamentally, fights in this universe were decided by who could seize outer space.

“In that case, why did the suppression ship flee to Kormat IV?” he pressed.

“Either Kormat IV has something that’ll reverse the situation or a means of escape for them. Or they’re just buying time.”

“Buying time?”

“If they don’t have an ace up their sleeve down there, then they’re either hoping for outside help or praying for something that’ll force us to retreat. I think they ran to Kormat IV for a reason, but what that reason may be is beyond me.”

Actually, there was another possibility, but I really hoped I was wrong.

“Anyway, we’re just standing by until the fleet’s troops arrive. Let’s get back to the colony and sell off our loot after handing things over to them.”

“You’re desperate,” Elma pointed out.

“Ah ha ha…” Mimi laughed nervously. “W-well, there’s no reason for us to expect to have to land on Kormat IV. Surely we’ll be fine!”

Would you two cut it out? Stop tempting fate like this! I’m not landing! I refuse!

Chapter 5:
Dust Planet Kormat IV

An hour later, we were in an Imperial Fleet dropship.

"I wanna go back!"

"Absolutely not."

Across from me sat Lieutenant Colonel Serena, wearing light combat armor instead of her usual neat, tidy military uniform. We were surrounded by Imperial Fleet marines, some wearing heavy combat armor and others in jumpsuits designed for piloting power armor. At least there were some buff women in the sea of buff men around me, making it a little less unpleasant.

Speaking of pleasant, I currently wore my light combat armor and the chameleon thermal mount I'd bought at Vlad Prime. Attaching an energy pack allowed me to be comfortable in harsh environments from -50 to 50 degrees Celsius. The hood on it also protected me from typhoons and sandstorms, and the chameleon feature camouflaged me in any environment. I also had a high-tech canteen that could collect up to two liters of water per day from the air's moisture. A universal mask claimed protection from harmful gases, unknown bacteria and viruses, and even biological weapons. Many other various items of survival gear were also included. Naturally, I was also equipped with my two swords, laser gun, and laser rifle. I was fully decked-out for combat.

"The runaway Goeritz Ixamal is a master swordsman who has been augmented with cybernetics and biotechnology. You and I are the only people in this star system who stand a chance against him."

"Why not just surround him and fry him with lasers?" Only sword supremacists would think that meant we *needed* to settle things with a swordfight. Why not use more civilized weapons?

"We attempted to do so when conquering the pirate base, and we sustained heavy casualties. Furthermore, we must capture him alive, no matter what it takes."

"Why?"

“Goeritz is the younger brother of Count Ixamal. He’s said to be the count’s right-hand man when it comes to affairs that require getting your hands dirty. We haven’t been able to capture or question him. Now that he’s in our grasp, we can’t let him slip away. Once we capture and extract information from him, we can crush Count Ixamal. He absolutely must be taken alive.”

“I don’t get all of this political stuff, but I *do* get that you personally want to see this Count Ixamal guy go down.”

“I suppose that’s all you need to understand.” Serena sighed. “Consider Count Ixamal’s family a gang of corrupt nobles.”

Corrupt nobles? Well, if his right-hand man is working with pirates, it’s obvious that he’s up to no good. I don’t want to stick my nose into the affairs of nobles, so I won’t question her any further on that.

I thought machine intelligence was keeping a close eye on nobles so they couldn’t do anything crazy, though? Well, either way, it doesn’t seem like a good idea to openly ask about that here. Nobles like Elma and Chris always seem hesitant to talk about machine intelligence, after all. Maybe it’s a tacit understanding, or an open secret I’m just not in on, or the sort of thing you really can’t talk about openly.

“Anyway, my specialty is fighting up in my spaceship,” I reminded Serena. “Hand-to-hand combat kind of isn’t my thing.”

“Ha ha ha, please. You showed such prowess during His Majesty’s tournament, didn’t you? I’m sure you’ll be fine. Nobody aside from the two of us can deal with him anyway, so I suggest you resign yourself now. And yes, I do have permission from your client. Not that they could refuse, of course, given this is a formal request from the Imperial Fleet.”

“You’re playing dirty, using your governmental authority like that.”

“How rude. All my actions were aboveboard and well within my rights.” Lieutenant Colonel Serena shrugged, parrying my every word with ease. *Grrr.*

“Thirty seconds until landing!” someone announced.

“All forces, prepare for landing!” Lieutenant Colonel Serena roared. “No chitchat! Everybody quiet, now!”

“Aye-aye!” the marines responded in unison. They were a big, unified military platoon, so why had I been thrown in with them all on my lonesome?

“Now, onward—to the depths of this world in the hellish throes of terraforming!”

Serena grinned just as the dropship began penetrating the planet’s atmosphere, causing it to shake violently.

“Aaaaaagh, nooooooo! Let me go hooooooome!”

My screams fell upon deaf ears, for the ship continued to cruelly descend to the surface of Kormat IV.

* * *

“Secure the landing site! Go, go, go!” Marines charged out of the dropship as soon as we landed, and Serena barked orders. “Armored marines, check and don your equipment! Engineers, prepare the material projectors! Now!”

They worked quickly, checking their equipment and setting up a base.

There was no sugarcoating it: the landing site was just the worst possible environment. The temperature was subzero, and the only good thing was that it was too arid to snow. But the fierce winds whipped up sand, and if I weren’t wearing a mask, my face would probably be covered in scratches.

During this bit of downtime while the marines set up camp, I used my terminal to communicate with the *Krishna*. My universal mask was connected wirelessly to my terminal, displaying the screen in my field of view.

“Hiro speaking. We landed safely, for what it’s worth.”

“Mimi here. That is a relief.”

“Yeah. So, you manage to get tracking on me yet?”

“All good,” Elma replied. “We can offer supporting fire any time you need it.”

“I’ll be counting on you if an emergency arises. Just don’t hit me.”

“Have a little faith in me. I’m fully trained as the *Krishna*’s sub-pilot, y’know.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Elma had gotten used to the *Krishna* by now, as the ship’s copilot. She wasn’t as good as me yet, but she piloted the ship well all the same. Remember, Elma used to pilot that mobile casket, the *Galactic Swin*, with its quirky controls. She wasn’t a *bad* pilot by any means. Not at all. If she honed her skills with the ship’s balancing mechanisms disabled, she’d be able to take her abilities to a whole new level.

“I hate fighting without my power armor.”

“What else are you gonna do? You can’t use your swords with power armor on.”

“Have you considered buying power armor for swordsmen?” Mimi suggested. “We do have the space for it.”

“I’ll have to look into that.”

Some lightweight power armor out there had so much range of motion that it was like wearing nothing at all, while simultaneously boosting your power and mobility. Equipping optional parts, like jump packs, meant you could even fly for short distances. The downside was that the plating was barely more durable than normal combat armor. It was still power armor, though, so it had high weather resistance and environmental adaptability. I really needed to look into it; it’d probably be a huge help in situations like this one.

“Y’know, Mimi, the fact that you’re suggesting expensive equipment to overcome these situations is proof that you’re getting used to the mercenary lifestyle.”

“Yep. Keep it up, and you’ll be a real dyed in the wool merc yet,” Elma teased.

“A-ah ha ha… I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.”

Don’t sound so unsure. Let it happen. It’ll be easy.

“Anyway, what’s next, Hiro?”

“Can I really not wait at our nice, safe base until somebody else finds the target?”

I was watching material projectors build a surprisingly sturdy-looking base at awe-inspiring speed as we spoke. I had no idea what sort of wild technology they were using, but it was printing out the base like a 3D printer building a model, only instead, it used light to print out a full-size building.

Seriously, how does that work? Well, it’s clearly some cutting-edge, high-tech device. I guess it’s no stranger than a video game character chopping down trees with their bare hands or building walls and ceilings in midair with no supports.

Before Mimi or Elma could reply, someone accosted me from behind. “Of course you can’t,” a familiar voice said. When I turned around, I saw Lieutenant Colonel Serena in her combat armor. She had her usual sword at her hip, in addition to several other pieces of equipment. “You and I are the trump cards in the upcoming battle against Goeritz, Hiro. Normal forces would crumble before him, so you and I will lead the vanguard during our search.”

“Er, Lieutenant Colonel? Isn’t the commander normally supposed to stand at the *rear* of the army?”

“How old-fashioned are you? With a command device, I can manage information with ease. It’s only natural for a noble commander to stand at the vanguard with their accelerated, parallelized thinking. An Imperial Fleet commander fights on the front line *while* commanding the entire army.”

“Right, of course.” In other words, I was going to have to lead the vanguard with Serena in this awful weather. Yep. Just great. “I wanna go home…”

“Absolutely not.” Lieutenant Colonel Serena grinned brightly behind the translucent helmet that covered her face.

Damn you!

* * *

“Hostiles approaching! Twenty-two in total!”

“Hiro and I will engage. Support us.”

“Aye-aye!”

“Come on. We’re going.”

“Aw, damn it all!” was my battle cry as I ran onto the battlefield after Serena, who had already unsheathed her sword and lunged into the fray.

As for me, I dual-wielded one big sword and one smaller sword. They weren’t regular old steel swords, of course. They were reinforced, high-frequency blades with sharpness and durability rivaling J*di lightsabers. Honestly, I couldn’t tell if these things counted as high-tech or low-tech.

“I’ll take the left,” she said curtly.

“Yeah, yeah!” I watched as Serena rushed straight into the enemy’s left side, her big sword at the ready.

Then, I rushed the right flank. We were up against strange, distorted, humanoid life-forms made of what looked like bare, dark-red muscle tissue. Their arm and leg joints were made of rocky material. Their most striking feature? They all looked twisted. Like, literally.

Three lunged at me all at once, but it was rushed and lacked coordination. Despite their humanlike appearance, their movements were decidedly inhuman.

One coiled its body like a spring, then threw itself at me, its rocky arms spread wide as it flew like an arrow. I dodged to the side and cut it in half with my right-hand sword. The second one snapped itself like a whip, but I slid off its right arm with my left-hand sword. The third then lunged at me like the first, coiled up to spring, but I evaded and swung both swords, cutting it into three pieces.

With the window of opportunity Serena and I had opened for them, the marines charged in with their laser rifles and laser launchers to mow down the hostiles, which we tentatively called the Twisteds. I thrust my left-hand sword into the ground and whipped out a laser gun from its holster on my thigh, adding to their fire. Of course, I’d set my laser to lethal.

“Tch!” I clicked my tongue at a Twisted who’d made it through the hail of lasers, swung my right-hand sword, and parried its charge before firing a barrage of lasers into its defenseless back. *Can’t relax for a damn second around these things.*

“Requesting casualty report!” Serena called.

“Team A, no casualties!”

“Team B, no casualties!”

“Likewise! Team C has no casualties!”

It seemed we’d all made it through this attack in one piece. I sheathed my swords and holstered my gun with a sigh.

“Lieutenant Colonel, I think it may be dangerous to continue,” I said.

“If things continue this way, I foresee no problems. We have plenty of support at our backs,” she replied, sheathing her sword and looking up at the sky.

It was impossible to see very far through the raging dust storm with the naked eye, but my universal mask’s HUD displayed the *Krishna* as well as small ships belonging to the Imperial Fleet. The small ships all fired lasers intermittently ahead of us, causing dazzling light and explosive booms each time.

“I guess… But you certainly are strong, Lieutenant Colonel.”

Six Twisted corpses, each sliced in two, lay where she had swung her sword. She’d killed twice the number that I had—a clear and simple indicator of her skill.

“A mere difference in nature, in my opinion. My swordplay is aggressive. I charge forward to cut them down, whereas you tend to wait in ambush,” Serena said, surveying me from head to toe. “If we fought to the death, even I can’t predict who would be left standing. I doubt I would go down in a one-sided defeat, but I don’t see myself overwhelming you, either.”

“I think you’re getting a little too into this. I’m absolutely not crossing blades with you.” The thought of fighting the woman who’d just cut down six Twisteds in an instant was far too scary. Hard pass. I’d rather run. “Still, these Twisteds… They’re something else, huh?”

“Indeed. We’ll analyze them later, but at a glance, they bear an uncanny resemblance to the aggressive native wildlife that appeared on Kormat III. Note the rocky arms.”

Serena used her foot to toy with the arm of one of the Twisteds that lay at her feet. The rocky parts were extremely hard; depending on where they were struck, they could even withstand direct hits from laser rifles. Though, they were nothing before our sharp blades.

“Is there no way we can make this a little safer and easier, though?”

“That would be difficult. Military RVs would turn into caskets if they got their hands on them.”

High-mobility recon vehicles—RVs for short—were stronger and more durable than power armor and were naturally more mobile than any infantry. They would still be helpless if mobbed by the Twisteds, of course. Three RVs and the twelve power-armor-wearing marines on them had already been sacrificed in the earlier scouting mission, which had led to the abandonment of further RV-based scouting operations.

“Small ships’ sensors can’t detect them, either. What a royal pain…”

Fine metal particulates caused by the terraforming machines had been whipped up by the violent dust storms. This made it especially difficult for sensors to work in affected areas properly, adding to the complexity of the situation. The suppression ship’s landing site had been marked by the *Krishna*, but this special dust storm had fudged our placement of the mark somewhat. As a result, we had to slowly trudge through this awful environment in search of the suppression ship, all while keeping an eye out for Twisted attacks. *Ha ha ha, damn it all.*

“Y’know, with all these Twisteds around, do you think that guy…uh, that noble, might be dead by now?” I asked.

We’d been able to repel the Twisteds with a combination of hefty, close-range air support, solid equipment, and sheer numbers and firepower. Our target had none of that. If the Twisteds attacked him, he probably wouldn’t last too long.

“That would be a problem. We would need to locate his corpse and return with at least part of it. That should be ample proof that Goeritz was conspiring with pirates in the Kormat System.” Serena finally stopped

kicking the Twisted arm and shrugged. “Besides, he’s safe if he stays in his suppression ship. But most importantly, if these Twisteds and the aggressive wildlife on Kormat III were his doing, then he surely has some means of controlling them. If so, we will need to seize those means.”

“Yeah, I guess so. If we could control them, we wouldn’t have to worry about the ones here or on Kormat III anymore.”

“Exactly. Now, it seems the troops are ready. Let us proceed.”

“Aye-aye, ma’am.”

Serena walked ahead of me to lead her troops through the raging dust storm. I joined their ranks and followed the Lieutenant Colonel.

* * *

Half the sand had been turned into glass by the heat of the laser explosions; it crackled and crunched under our feet. The dust storm meant visibility was horrible, but despite the awful conditions, we still encountered the monstrous wildlife.

“This all but confirms that the attacking ‘wildlife’ here are manmade,” Serena said to me, staring directly ahead. We both wore helmets that covered our entire heads, so those words came through our communicators.

“They’re exactly like the ones on Kormat III.”

“Indeed. The fact that they’re nearly identical is evidence.”

She couldn’t declare they were the same without a DNA test, hence the ‘nearly.’ It wasn’t *impossible*, but it was extremely unlikely that the beings that had appeared on Kormat III and IV were entirely unrelated despite their similar appearance and hostility.

“Lieutenant Colonel, we’ve detected what we believe to be the suppression ship!”

“Wonderful. Share the information with the ships above us.”

“Ma’am, yes, ma’am!”

The location was immediately shared to my universal mask's HUD, as well. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't far. We'd come to the surface because it'd been impossible to search from the sky, after all.

"Are we gonna walk?" I asked.

"It's not far. Consider how long it would take to secure a dropship landing site, board the dropship, put away our deployed weapons, take roll call, and all the rest. I doubt any time saved would be all that noticeable."

"Fair enough." It wasn't worth complaining about, so I walked like a good boy.

* * *

"Suppression ship spotted up ahead! It's stranded, stuck in the ground!"

"Send drones to investigate the interior first. We don't want to be greeted by a reactive explosive. Engineers, set up a shield generator and construct a provisional base."

"Aye-aye!"

Under Serena's leadership, the marines got right to work. I didn't have anything to do, so I just sort of stood around spacing out a bit. Oh, but I was also keeping an eye out for enemies, of course.

"Reactive explosives, huh? Do you think he had the chance to set those up?" I asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. It's possible that he tampered with the suppression ship's generator, regardless. We wouldn't want to carelessly approach and end up being blown away, would we?"

"Yeah, miss me with that."

If you overloaded a spaceship's generator with ill intent, it could turn into a powerful explosive, one just as strong as the more typical reactive explosives. You couldn't suicide bomb like that in *Stella Online*, but I had no proof that people didn't do it in this universe.

The scout who'd been operating the drone had reported that there was nothing dangerous inside the suppression ship, and a search team had entered. We'd already confirmed that the target wasn't inside, so Serena and I were waiting and watching from the nice, safe defense base.

"Shall we take a break and eat something, since we have a moment?"

"Sure."

This temporary base was protected by a land-based shield generator that fended off the dust storms raging outside, meaning we could take off our helmets to eat and drink. I took off my universal mask as Lieutenant Colonel Serena ordered her subordinates to break for lunch in shifts. I glanced at them and took out the rations that Mimi and Elma had made.

"Ew, what is that?" Serena asked.

What I pulled out of my backpack was an alien monster that looked like a facehugger. *Oh, yeah. This thing. It's ugly, but it doesn't taste all that bad. The shell-looking part is surprisingly soft and sort of like pumpkin, while the insides are like a sweet, creamy paste. I hear some countries use them as rations.*

"It's surprisingly tasty," I said.

"You've eaten that thing before?!"

"Uh, yeah…?"

Why it was in my backpack at a time like this was the question. Mimi was no prankster, so Elma had to be the culprit. I could even see Elma playfully sticking her tongue out upon my discovery. However, Mimi was the one who usually dealt with these more alien ingredients. I'd packed my backpack with Mimi, too, so it was possible that it was in here with her full knowledge. *I'll have to interrogate those two when I get back to the ship. Don't you forget this, girls…*

"Um…"

"Probably a cute little prank played by my cute little crew members, ha ha ha…"

Let's just pretend I didn't see the facehugger. I shoved the thing back into my backpack and looked for something else to eat. Finally, I found something else buried at the bottom. It was packaged in something similar

to tin foil and labeled *Penitence Kingdom Type-3 Military Ration*. The back showed the ingredients and nutritional info found in each serving. It was about as big as one of those castella cakes they sold whole at supermarkets. It was dense, too, which I figured was a guarantee of a satisfying meal.

"What is that?" Serena asked me.

"Uh… Looks like rations from a place called the Penitence Kingdom?"

"Oh, I see. Rather far away, but relations between them and the Empire aren't bad."

“Huh. Well, it looks like real food, at least, so I’ll give it a try.” The entire package was stuffed full of something that looked like a dense pound cake.

“That smells good.”

It did, too. The scent was sweet, like some kind of fruit. *Yeah, Serena sure is girly, the way sweets attract her right away. I mean, there are plenty of men with sweet tooths, too—I don’t mind sweets.*

“Want a bite?” I offered.

“Sure. I’d be happy to share my rations with you, too.”

I broke a reasonable portion of the pound cake-like rations off for Serena before biting into it myself. She returned the favor with some kind of dry sausage. *Oh wait, I know what this is.*

“There it is… Military sausage.”

“Oh? Have you heard of it?”

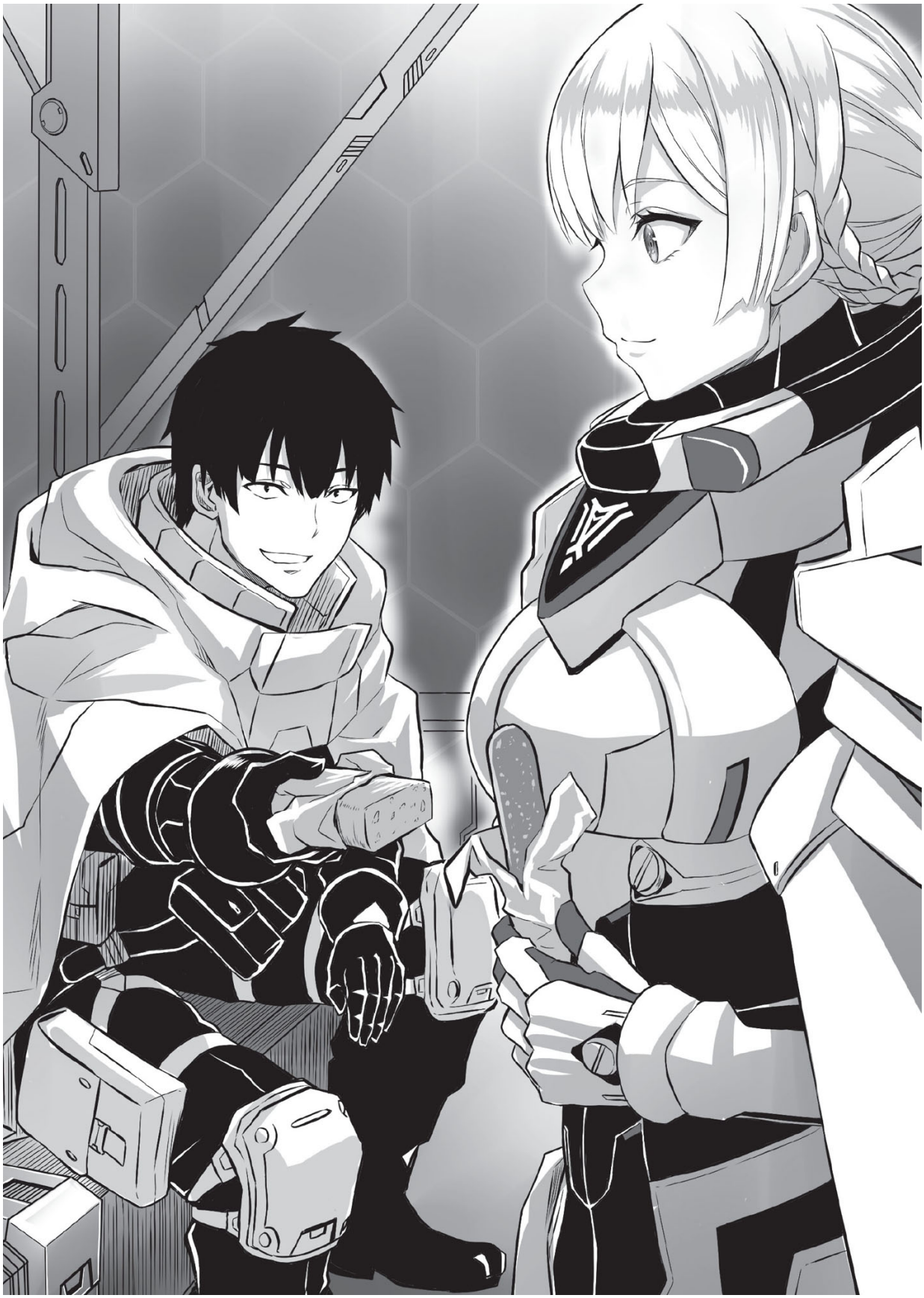
“We bought an assorted pack of military rations a while back and taste-tested them all.”

Penitence Kingdom rations were in my right hand, and an Imperial Fleet sausage was in my left. I decided to bite down on the former first. It had a hefty, moist, bread-like texture. It was sweet, but this sweetness didn’t come from sugar alone. Dried fruits had been mixed into the batter, and cake had been soaked in syrup to keep it moist. No, I tasted alcohol, too, so they were probably using sweet sake as well.

“Ooh. I feel like I’ve eaten something like this before,” I mused.

“Is that so?”

“Hmm… What was it?” *Oh yeah, now I remember! Stollen… A sort of German fruitcake, I think. Well, there’s no way I can explain that to Serena, so I’ll just drop it and move on. Time to sample that military sausage.* “Mm. Salty food really does the trick when you’re tired.”



“Sweating does tend to make you crave something salty.”

It still tasted like cheap, dry sausage sold at convenience stores, but Serena was right; I was really craving that intense, salty flavor. It still felt like it was lacking a little something, and the texture was off—it wasn’t very meaty, at all—but it had salt and fat. It was like a crappy salt and calorie supplement.

“I think I like the Penitence Kingdom’s rations more,” Serena decided.

“Gotta agree with you there.”

However, eating three servings of this a day would get old fast. It’d be a hell of a chore, too. The thing was so large you’d get bored halfway through. But if I had to rate these individually, I’d have to say the Penitence Kingdom’s Type-3 Ration was both tastier and more satisfying.

Of course, the Imperial Fleet had plenty of other rations aside from the sausages—crackers and the like, along with various main and side dishes—so maybe they won the most satisfying overall vote. As long as they didn’t have anything *too* bad that I didn’t know about, anyway.

“Are you going to eat…whatever that other thing is, too?”
She shuddered.

“I mean, yeah, if I get the chance. To be honest, I think it tastes better than both the Imperial Fleet *and* the Penitence Kingdom rations.”

“Huh.” Serena stared at me, dubious, but I’d sampled all three of them myself, so I knew I was right. If the opportunity arose, I’d have to get her to try a bite.

* * *

THUD. THUD. THUD.

The ground shook, and five-meter-tall monsters leaped from the dust storm.

“A Grappler’s gotten through!”

“Where’s our close-range air support?!”

“Their hands are full!”

The thing bore a hideous resemblance to humans, despite its monstrous appearance: two rock-covered arms, multiple legs big enough to easily trample the average person, an eyeless face, a drooling mouth, and teeth way too much like my own.

“Hiro, you and I must fight.”

“You wanna fight those things with *swords*? Are you insane?”

“Any living thing can be killed if you cut off its head. Draw its attention from the front.”

“Hey, wait!”

Serena held her sword in both hands and charged at the large aggressive life-form, which we tentatively called a Grappler. I followed, flustered. I couldn’t exactly let the Lieutenant Commander go in alone.

“GREEEEEEEE!”

Serena’s white combat armor seemed to draw the Grappler’s attention. Don’t ask me how it saw her, since it didn’t have eyes. It let out a threatening cry and raised its rocky arm, no doubt planning on turning the charging Serena into mincemeat with one blow.

The rocky arm slammed into the ground, creating an explosion that hid Serena in a cloud of dust. It’d be no laughing matter if that blow had crushed her—but I saw a healthy Serena circling behind the rocky arm in my universal mask’s HUD.

That’s high-tech devices for you. Dust and sand are nothing to it.

“Take this!” I slashed at the divide between rock and flesh while its rocky arm was still stuck in the ground. This reinforced particle blade could cut through power armor plating with ease. Living flesh and bone might as well have been tissue paper.

“GYAAAAARGH?!”

Black blood spewed from the Grappler’s severed arm as it recoiled in agony. At the same time, it swung its remaining arm diagonally at me from above.

I held my breath, and the world around me slowed—it was like time itself was being stretched. I moved to escape the beast's arm, the heavy, dusty air that seemed to coil around me shifting away. I aligned my blade with the attacking arm to cut it open, rock and all.

I held the sword tightly; if I didn't align my movements with the enemy's arm and cut through it precisely, my sword would shatter. The Grappler tottered as it cried in agony again, blood gushing from the cut.

"Well done. You get full marks," Serena said through my universal mask's communicator. I wondered where she was—and finally spotted her atop the Grappler's shoulder. She must've run straight up its body somehow.

"Haaah!"

There was a flash of light. On top of the Grappler's shoulder, Serena swung her sword—formally called the Monomolecular Sword—and sliced its head off in one blow. The Grappler stiffened up all at once and fell straight forward…directly at me…

"Whoa! Damn! Jeez!" I rushed back and managed to narrowly evade the falling Grappler. Serena landed gracefully beside me. *Damn you, being all cool at times like this.*

She smirked. "Sloppy to the very end, I see."

"Unlike you, I'm just an unrefined commoner and a mercenary."

"Don't debase yourself like that. You are, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a warrior who can overcome his fear and face powerful foes. Sloppy or not, that is worthy of respect," Serena said, the biggest smile ever plastered on her face.

I feel like she's taking me for a ride here, but… Yeah… Being complimented outright is kinda embarrassing.

"Uh, right. So… How's the rest of the battle going?"

"It seems they've settled things on their end as well."

The only big one that had broken through was the Grappler that we'd taken down. There had been dozens of Twisteds, too, but the marines had dealt with them with ease.

“Gaps in our air support, huh? What are you doing up there?”

“My bad. We missed that one,” Elma apologized through the communicator.

I wasn’t actually mad at her, though. It seemed like there were a lot of enemies out there, so if only *one* made it through, then they must’ve been doing well. Besides, the *Krishna* wasn’t the only ship providing air support. Imperial Fleet dropships and small craft were working alongside it. Beside me, Serena was chastising her own support ships, telling them to not let another big one through again.

“Use those flak cannons, too,” I directed. “I know it feels like a waste, but it’s better than letting them through.”

“Right. We’ll reimburse the cost of your ammunition, after all,” Serena added.

“You hear that? Don’t be stingy.”

“Roger. We’ll give them heaps of flak.”

My call with the *Krishna* ended.

“I think we can make it through for the time being…”

“Yes, that will do for now.”

I saw a small mountain up ahead amid the raging winds blowing dust everywhere. No, not a mountain—this thing clearly wasn’t a natural structure.

After we finished investigating the suppression ship, we marched onward, following tracks found by the scouts. We fought plenty of Twisteds and Grapplers along the way until we finally arrived at the foot of the strange structure.

“What is that?” I asked. “Looks like a big ant hill.”

“I’m certain it’s their nest. We encountered them more and more frequently as we approached.”

What looked like a giant anthill at first glance was actually an extremely large structure shaped like a bumpy mountain. According to my universal mask’s HUD, it was over 300 meters tall. Was it made of dirt? It didn’t look like the surrounding soil; it was more of a reddish-brown.

“What do we do now? Looks easy to destroy.” No matter how big it was, it was just a pile of dirt. It wasn’t like it would stand up to a ship’s plating-vaporizing, hull-detonating, shield-bursting laser cannons.

“I would love to, but…”

“Is capturing what’s-his-face really that important? What was it? Goeritz, or whoever?”

“That is correct,” Serena said. “Though, to be clear, I’m not the one who wants him. My superiors do.”

“But charging into the enemy’s nest with our forces and no air support is an objectively stupid thing to do.”

We’d managed to fend off the monsters’ attacks with support from spaceships and dropships up to this point. If we had to fight those Grapplers without any aerial support, we’d definitely have casualties left and right. To be fair, the marines were true infantry forces of the Grakkan Empire, unlike the colonists, who were only armed with laser rifles. The marines’ power, military-grade equipment, and training were on a completely different level from the locals. We might still be able to pull this off as long as we went in knowing that sacrifices would have to be made.

“Don’t worry. Reinforcements are coming. We’re only scouts meant to find their base. Our reinforcements are the ones meant to be the true fighting force.”

“Oh, really?”

I thought we had a pretty solid fighting force already. They had a bigger one? Serena received a call as I stood there, watching curiously. After a moment of hushed whispering, she looked up to the sky and said, “They’re coming.”

“From above?”

I followed her lead and looked up. The spaceships and dropships in the sky above us were moving out of the way. High in the sky, far above the other ships, a large number of *something* raining down.

“Whoa, what the hell? Orbital bombardment?”

“No. Reinforcements.”

They fell from space, enveloped in the heat and flames of adiabatic compression, and landed around the structure. The earth itself shattered under their merciless landing, Dirt and dust flew in the air as a large earthquake rumbled beneath us.

"That's one hell of an entrance. And they are?"

"The real ground force," Serena declared.

"Impressive…"

Metal stakes stabbed into the ground. *Something*—I didn't know what—dripped to the ground and began to change form. They were metal soldiers without blood, tears, or fear of death. They had metal bones far stronger than any human's, plating, special metal-fiber muscles that could turn a normal person to mincemeat with one blow, and the ability to wield heavy weapons no human could ever hope to lift.

There was a whole variety of heavy battle bots, ranging from human-sized to five meters tall.

"Military-grade battle bots, huh?" Mentally, I was screaming, *Whoa, just like T*tanfall!* but I managed to stop myself from saying it out loud.

"Exactly. Shall we step back and watch as the stage is set?"

Engineers began constructing a sturdy forward outpost, completing them in the blink of an eye. I followed Serena as she moved toward it.

* * *

A great man once said, "When it comes to combat, numbers are everything!" Seeing this battle unfold led me to believe those words.

"Our forces are too overwhelming. They're doomed," I said smugly.

"They're not exactly ours," Serena reminded me.

"Yeah, I'm aware."

The human-sized battle bots fired deadly lasers from their arms. When Twisteds latched onto them, they simply overpowered them, pulled them off, and crushed them. The two-to-three-meter-tall medium bots were

even more ferocious. They had plasma launchers, allowing them to crush both the large Grapplers and Bulls—enemies with powerful plating that charged to attack—head-on. But the ultimate fighters were the five-meter-tall large bots.

"The giant ones are awesome," I commented.

Large, yet agile, they stood on the front lines, mowing down larger enemies with artillery and melee attacks while simultaneously fending off even more with their shields. Given their size, they must have had generator power to spare.

"The Titan-class battle bots are the backbone of land-based warfare," Serena explained. "Just between you and me, the majority of the Imperial Fleet's surface fighters are battle bots."

"Yeah, they're literally expendable. And cheap, too."

Serena shrugged wordlessly in response.

As long as you weren't a total POS, then it took fifteen to eighteen years before a human became a viable candidate for a soldier. Fifteen was too young in my opinion, but that was the minimum requirement for your body to be considered developed enough for the military, at least. Of course, if you *were* a total POS, you could have soldiers faster than that.

Not only did that mean child soldiers but cloned soldiers created using biotechnology, too. Seeing the battle bots deployed in front of me right now made me figure that the Grakkan Empire *probably* wasn't going in that direction…or so I hoped, anyway. I hadn't heard any rumors about stuff like that so far, at least. Then again, the Twisteds were almost certainly a product of some similar technology, and their presence here was proof that someone in or close to the Empire was definitely using biotechnology for military purposes.

Anyway, back to cost and ease of replacement. In short, yeah, using people as soldiers was extremely expensive. But battle bots? They cost money to build, sure, but they were far cheaper than raising and caring for a human for at least fifteen years. That goes for actual monetary cost *and* the sheer time required, too.

Once you had a production line, battle bots could be mass-produced, as long as you had the resources. You didn't have to keep training them—

just transfer the battle data from an older bot to your new one, and bam, you instantly have an experienced soldier. You didn't have to worry about things like paying out survivors' pensions or salaries, feeding them, or providing medical treatment. From this perspective, there were only pros and no cons.

"And cheap, too," I repeated.

"Why did you say that twice?"

"Just thinking of all the trouble the Imperial Fleet has to deal with."

"Your concern is unnecessary and unwanted."

If they could turn spaceships into battle bots—space battle bots?—then they'd be able to reduce costs even more, right? Why didn't they do that? Maybe the Grakkan Empire was hesitant to turn all their forces into bots, given their past conflicts with machine intelligence. Either way, here they were, using battle bots as surface forces. Maybe because they wanted to keep their options open? An orbital bombardment was on the table in a pinch like this. I found myself a little interested in it all.

"How'd you manage to get such a large force anyway?" I asked.

"They were originally dispatched to fight off the aggressive wildlife on Kormat III. We've simply reallocated them to Kormat IV."

"Oh, I see."

A few days had passed since the Grapplers' appearance on Kormat III. The Kormat System wasn't too far from a gateway, so it didn't take too long to contact the capital or move forces in from other locations. This meant that transportation here was a lot better than in frontier systems without any nearby gateways, like the Izulux System where we'd fought the crystal life-forms or the Tarmein System where I'd met Mimi and Elma.

"Kinda boring, though, isn't it?"

"You want to jump into the fray? Be my guest," Serena offered.

"Hard pass. No, thanks."

I'd be dead meat if I jumped into a fight between battle bots and aggressive wildlife. This universe might have felt like the video game *Stella Online* sometimes, but it was *real*. I wouldn't respawn if I died here—at least, I didn't think I would—and dying was the last thing I wanted to do.

“Well, we don’t know what resources are at their disposal. It may take a while yet, so you’re free to take it easy for the time being.”

“Sounds good to me.”

I’d just monitor the wargame for a while, then. More battle bot drop pods rained from the sky. I watched them descend and reached for the canteen at my hip.

***

“We got to see it too! It was incredible! You were so cool!”

“Wamdo was happy about all the photos he shot too.”

“Good to hear.”

I conversed with Mimi and Elma through my universal mask. The battle bots and Twisteds were still fighting a fierce battle, but the battle bots’ perfect coordination and incredible firepower continued to overwhelm the Twisteds. It was only a matter of time before the bots reached the construct their monsters were spawning from.

“I was very impressed when you fought that giant with your sword.”

“It was awesome! I’ll send you the data Wamdo gave us!”

A small window opened on my universal mask’s HUD and played a video of me and Lieutenant Colonel Serena fighting the Grappler, shot from the perfect angle.

“Very nice camera angle there,” I said.

An orb appeared over my shoulder in the video. It was an autonomous photographic device that followed me around using the same kind of technology as the gravity spheres we used to drink in the cockpit. It combined holograms with a few other kinds of tech to record my movements and surroundings on the planet’s surface. *Y’know, you really gotta wonder why the people of this universe keep using technology in such bizarre ways.*

“So, are you off duty now, girls?” I asked them.

“The Imperial Fleet’s assault ship is here,” Elma replied. “They specialize in attacking grounded targets, so we won’t get any opportunities to act. We’re on standby just in case we need to protect your camp.”

“Ah, I see. It must have high support capabilities as an assault ship,” I mused, watching a shower of green plasma rain down upon the battlefield.

From what I’d learned, those plasma cannonballs were actually an application of shield technology. They trapped ultra-hot plasma inside an extremely weak shield and fired it. The shots were slow and couldn’t go very far, so they weren’t typically adopted by mercenaries fighting space battles. They’d developed plasma accelerators, but even then, the ammo flew too slowly for easy use… Despite having an ammo limit, anti-ship torpedoes were a lot easier to use, especially since the ship’s speed added to their momentum.

Speaking of plasma weapons, they were used by the Imperial Fleet’s battle bots. They were extremely powerful. The new, second generation guns fired shield enclosed plasma, while first-generation ones fired physical ammunition that caused a plasma explosion the moment they struck the target. They were about equal in strength, but the shield-utilizing second generation had no ammunition limit. Since the plasma was enclosed in shields, there was extremely little wear on the weapon itself. Get a crazy enough generator, and you basically had unlimited ammunition.

“This video is pretty awesome, too,” Elma said.

“It is!” Mimi agreed. “It’s so reassuring to see the fleet’s battle bots destroying those monsters.”

“It’s like watching an action holo-flick, huh? Rare to see battle bots doing all the work, though.”

This universe had all kinds of video products for entertainment. Of course, there were plenty where the Imperial Fleet fought hostile aliens they couldn’t communicate with, but there were also tons with situations like the one we were in now. Battle bots typically played a small role in these, while soldiers—including nonhuman ones, of course—did most of the fighting. But in reality, it seemed battle bots did the majority of the fighting.

“Well, Wamdo has plenty of footage of Imperial soldiers fighting—not including me, of course,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll find a way to get

around the problem."

"I think so, too," Mimi agreed.

It seemed like the Grakkan Empire's nobility tended to avoid machine intelligence, even going as far as shying away from giving machines important tasks. Well, maybe their nobility would position it as relying on the sweat of their brow instead of on machines? Not that I'd know.

"Once the battle bots have set the stage, I guess it'll end with me and Serena sword fighting the final boss. Wow, it kind of is like a war flick, isn't it?"

"You gotta have a brawl in a burning ship, a knife fight, or a sword battle at the end. Always," Elma said matter-of-factly.

"Ah ha ha… Those may be more realistic than I thought…" Mimi joked.

So this universe has movie cliches, too, huh? A dramatic, final, hand-to-hand battle with the bad guy is cool and all, but in reality, I think you'd go for a cleaner end with, say…a poison gas attack or something.

* * *

"Of course that won't work," Serena declared.

"It won't?"

"You and I are both equipped to avoid that very problem. He most likely is, too."

"I see."

Her helmet and my universal mask were both able to defend against biological and chemical weapons. Mine was the kind that only covered the face, rather than the whole head, so it wouldn't protect me from poisons that seeped into your skin.

Should I buy a suit of combat armor like Serena's so I'm better prepared for the future? Lightweight power armor is sort of all I need,

though… Well, lightweight power armor manufacturers probably also handle combat armor, so I'll think about it when the time comes.

"How are things going now?" I asked her.

"A portion of our forces have already infiltrated and are securing the bridgehead. Their external forces should be cleaned up soon." Serena tapped her fingertips on thin air. She was probably using an interface on her helmet's HUD to give orders to the battle bots and her soldiers, though I couldn't see it myself. Honestly, it was impressive that she could do her job so well while chatting with me like this, just more proof that she was, indeed, a noble.

"Besides, if we were going to do that, then we might as well have destroyed the place with orbital bombardment the moment we found it."

"Oh, right. We gotta capture him alive, don't we? Damn, what a pain in the ass."

"Don't be uncouth. Anyway, in the worst case, we confirm his death and prove that he is indeed Goeritz. That will do well enough."

"We don't actually need to lop his head off, do we?"

Serena frowned. "Lop his head off…? What sort of barbarian are you?"

Okay, look. Hearing that from someone who gleefully swings her sword around every chance she gets isn't exactly convincing. Hell, you just took the head off of a Grappler as a trophy, didn't you?

"Anyway, enough about beheading," I said, changing the subject. "Why exactly did Goeritz flee here?"

"To buy time, I presume. I believe he planned to hole up in this fortress and wait for the Ixamal family to send reinforcements."

"Hmm. Is that really it?"

Something about it doesn't sit right with me. Now that he's this cornered, he has no way to escape. I doubt there's any secret exit that deep inside that structure, though I guess that's how most fortresses work. It's not exactly a great place to hole up in to begin with. Hell, all of Kormat IV is a dead end. Once you're here, you can't escape the Imperial Fleet. Their

forces and *the Dalenwald family's forces are deployed and up in orbit. If he tries to escape the atmosphere, he'll be captured right away.*

"Is it possible that he used some kind of drilldozer and dug his way out below us?" I suggested.

"I've never heard of such a thing. Do they exist?"

"I've never heard of them, either." This universe probably had the technology to make it happen, but I didn't know if it actually existed.

"Don't you think it's a little silly to theorize about something when you don't even know if it exists?"

"Fair. Okay, other possibilities… What if he's destroying evidence?"

Serena raised an eyebrow. "Destroying evidence?"

"He should already know that his top priority is to avoid being captured alive or being found dead and having his identity proven. What if he's letting the Twisteds eat him so his body unrecoverable, or to force us to declare him missing or something?"

"Well… That would be a most unpleasant turn of events. We would have to search the structure for any 'leftovers,' tear open the Twisteds' stomachs, dig through the contents, and so on. But if that was his plan, I would assume he'd sooner crash his suppression ship into the planet's surface."

I paused. "Makes sense."

Crash-landing straight into the planet would cleanly destroy any evidence—him or otherwise. If he was willing to end his own life to destroy evidence, then that would be more of a sure thing. It seemed like the "destroying evidence" hypothesis was unlikely now.

"Given the Twisteds' actions, I'm certain he's panicking," Serena declared. "Maybe something even he couldn't have expected is happening."

"You think so?"

"Yes. I doubt he expected you to trail him all the way to Kormat IV. He'd hoped to use the suppression ship's speed to shake you off, but you managed to hold on until the end and discovered his hiding place. The ensuing recon operation also identified the structure that serves as his base.

Furthermore, the landing squad meant for Kormat III has been reassigned here, giving us an advantage."

"So he's totally screwed, then. But he won't stop resisting, and he won't surrender…"

I didn't know what kind of guy this Goeritz was, but he'd broken through the Imperial Fleet's encirclement and fled all the way to Kormat IV. He was clearly a sore loser, if nothing else.

"In that case," I continued, "maybe holing up and waiting for rescue was his best option."

"I believe so. However, the Kormat System is Dalenwald territory. The Imperial Fleet has been trying to capture him for a while, as well. I think it's impossible for the Ixamal family to intervene, no matter how hard Goeritz may push for it."

"So he's beyond screwed."

"His struggle is in vain, yes. But we hardly have the leeway to play along; moving an army isn't exactly free."

"Oh, I see… I *see*."

Maybe he really is just trying to be a nuisance. He's basically already lost. Now he's simply trying to take as many people down with him as possible while doing as much damage to the Dalenwald family as possible. They'll probably have to bear a lot of this military operation's costs, after all.

"What do you see, exactly?"

"His motivation here, maybe," I explained. "Maybe he's just trying to stir up as much trouble as possible. You know, be a real pain in the ass for people while this all goes down. He knows he's screwed either way."

Serena frowned and sighed angrily. "That does seem like something the Ixamals would do."

How could nobles with a reputation like that act as they pleased for so long? There had to be some complicated circumstances behind all this. Not that it mattered or anything. All I knew was that I'd best avoid the Ixamal family at all costs.

* * *

Despite my concerns, the operation progressed smoothly. An entry point was opened, the bridgehead was secured, and the only thing left to do was continue to clear the place and investigate. There were some battle bot casualties along the way, but there was no stopping them. They continued to overwhelm the enemy with firepower and armor until they'd finally reached their destination—the underground bunker.

"The whole aboveground part was a bust, huh?"

"Clearing and securing it was necessary. We wouldn't want any lingering regrets."

"Guess that's fair." Getting targeted from behind on our way down wouldn't be fun. Clearing the surface structure first had probably been a smart move.

"Hmm…" Serena murmured.

"Something wrong?"

"The combat bots clearing the underground section have discovered a manmade structure. It looks like we've hit the jackpot."

"Sounds like good news."

But what exactly was it? Some kind of plant that created the Twisteds, maybe? But a factory needed materials, no matter how advanced this universe's technology might be. There couldn't possibly be a place that generated Twisteds infinitely, so where had those materials come from?

"Wonder how that affects the terraforming process," I mused. "Man, it's gonna be a pain if there are more of these on the planet's surface."

"I'm sure we can destroy them with an orbital bombardment."

"I didn't expect such a muscle-headed solution from you."

"It's efficient," Serena said matter-of-factly. "Seizing and destroying each one with ground troops would just be a waste of money."

That may be true, but aren't you worried about destroying the environment? Wait, I guess that doesn't matter, since it's being terraformed. We could destroy the environment and Twisteds alike and just repair it later, huh? That is *efficient.*

"Goeritz is likely within the underground structure. Let's go," she said.

"Aye-aye, ma'am."

Why not just let the battle bots finish the job? I wondered. *Right, we have to bring the guy back alive.* I didn't like it, but I figured I should just play along. *I just hope this is the final battle. Let's get going.*

* * *

The underground corridor was filled with piles of Twisted corpses that'd been massacred by the battle bots.

"Cozy place."

"Yes, though there seem to be some quirks in operating it."

We traveled down the corridor in a hover vehicle originally developed to traverse uneven terrain. It could fit six people, including the driver, and though it wasn't very fast, it easily conquered uneven terrain, unexpectedly steep slopes, cliffs several meters high, and the like. Like the gravity sphere, it was made through a combination of gravity and inertial control technology.

"They really did clean the place up. I haven't seen signs of enemies anywhere."

"Even if any did remain, the high-mobility bots accompanying us would deal with them swiftly."

Alongside the hovering vehicle, which topped out at 30 kilometers an hour, was a military-use battle bot with a sharp figure. It was a bipedal bot with reverse-jointed legs it used to run and jump speedily alongside the underground structure invasion team. I didn't know what its firepower

looked like, but its mobility alone would no doubt make it tough to go up against. This probably wasn't even its top speed.

Time for a little thought exercise: what would I do if I had to fight it? Well, it didn't look too sturdy, so I'd probably aim for the legs and reduce its mobility. What's that, you ask? Why not just run? Of course, I'd run. I wouldn't aim for a fair fight against a battle bot with near-perfect accuracy. Back in *Stella Online*, those things were straight-up sharpshooters. They'd hit you almost 100 percent of the time. If you didn't have the armor or shields to stand up to their lasers, the best you could hope for was a draw, at best. Their reaction speed was faster than a human's, too, though private security bots were often underclocked to keep them from being too dangerous.

"So, how's the battle going *now*?"

"He's put up a shield," Serena said. "He really is doing his best to stall for time. Of course, it'll be broken by the time we arrive."

Shields had incredible defensive capabilities, protecting ships even when they collided with space debris during FTL drive. However, they weren't all-powerful, but were relatively weak against high-powered lasers, super-hot plasma weapons, and the explosions and shockwaves from missiles. And when two shields interacted, they'd rapidly exhaust each other.

The anti-ship reactive torpedoes on the *Krishna* came with attrition devices, too, which used the same shield-on-shield phenomenon to saturate their targets' defenses. Or so the *Stella Online* item description had said. I hadn't confirmed whether or not any of that was true in this universe.

"How are they planning on breaking through, by the way?" I assumed they'd use some sort of military equipment to get the job done. However, Serena only said that I'd know when I saw it. *Oh ho! Military secrets?* I naively thought to myself. As for what it was I saw?

"There's no better way than this," she declared proudly.

I could only say one thing when I saw it for myself: "Now that's brute-force if I've ever seen it."

Dozens of military battle bots fired their lasers at the shield protecting the facility while the five-meter-tall Titan-class bots rammed it,

their shields at full power. *Well, "ramming" doesn't quite describe it… It's more like smashing the crap out of it with their shields. It's basically ramming it, though.*

"The shield seems stronger than expected, but it won't last long at this rate."

"And when it breaks, it's our turn to fight?"

"No, that will have to wait a little longer. We'll send battle bots in first."

As we talked, the shield began to waver before suddenly vanishing. The instant it disappeared, the battle bots' lasers struck the wall of the structure. Small explosions sounded, leaving scorch marks behind. Yeah, shields in this universe didn't crack and shatter like in a certain fighting game.

After confirming that the shield had been oversaturated and was gone, the small and medium battle bots infiltrated the facility in an orderly formation. The Titan-class bot was too big, so it was stuck out here with us on stand-by.

"First, we will take control of the shield and main generators. We don't want the shield to trap us inside or risk a generator explosion."

"Sounds about right to me, but what do I know?"

I wasn't a tactician or anything, but it sounded smart to me. Securing an escape route was Infiltration 101. And if we secured the main generator, we'd be able to shut down the enemy's defensive weapons as well.

"As haphazard as ever, I see… It's almost time. Get ready."

"Aye-aye."

We still had to decide things with our swords in the end, despite all the combat the bots had seen. *Why? Why not just crush him with battle bots? Serena said we could recover his corpse in the worst case, didn't she? Was this about noble clout or something?*

"Our target has been found at the depths of the facility," Serena said a little under thirty minutes later. "Let's go."

"Roger that."

It looked like the battle bots had successfully trapped this Goeritz guy. The marines sprang into action on Serena's orders. Like us, they'd been left with nothing to do since the battle bots had arrived, so they were eager to take action.

Serena took the lead, the Imperial Fleet marines following close behind. I joined them, but I had a bad feeling about all this I just couldn't shake.

Is there a way this guy could turn the situation on its head right now? I racked my brain as we entered the man-made facility. We had to go in ourselves, even if I personally didn't like it. It was a military operation, after all, and I was just a mercenary my client had hired. Like it or not, I had to join them.

* * *

The inside of the facility had a conspicuously white interior that gave off research facility vibes. There weren't any horrifying Twisteds here, but we did find the destroyed remains of laser turrets and the like, courtesy of the battle bots who'd stormed the place earlier.

"Is that what they're made of?"

"Probably."

Many tube-like metal objects could be seen beyond a pane of glass that ran along the left side of the hallway. The tubes were all empty. What had been inside them? Given the location, it seemed like they'd probably contained whatever the Twisteds' were made of.

"That means up ahead is…"

"The production plant, most likely. I believe it's fundamentally the same as artificial meat production plants."

"Have you seen them before, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"Quite a few, due to some cases regarding illegal artificial meat plants."

"Oh… I see."

It seemed she'd been to hell and back several times over.

Artificial meat plants, huh? We did fight weird monsters that weren't Twisteds back in the Arein System. The Twisteds are way stronger, though.

"Sounds of battle up ahead!" a soldier reported.

"Battle bots suppressive fire. Let's hurry." Serena broke into a run. I followed close behind until we arrived in a spacious room.

"Uh…" I pointed at something thrashing wildly at the high-mobility battle bots: a humanlike Twisted that was over two-and-a-half meters tall and wielded a sword in each of its four arms. "Is that our objective?"

Serena nodded. "Indeed, it is."

Huh? Seriously? That thing? Is it even human anymore?

"And we're meant to capture that thing alive?"

"If possible, yes."

"Good luck trying to interrogate it."

How do I even describe this guy? He was an alien creature with four arms, and his dark-red muscle fibers were covered in that rocky, armor-like substance. Even if we captured him alive, it didn't seem like we'd be able to get any info out of him. But at the same time, I didn't see any way to prove this monstrosity was Goeritz if we killed him and brought back his corpse.

"His movements are getting sharper by the second, aren't they?" I noted.

"Perhaps he's getting used to his new form. If we don't dispense with him quickly, things may get ugly."

"Can't we just take him down with a volley of lasers?"

"About that…" Serena turned her eyes to the rampaging, four-armed monster, prompting the battle bots to fire their lasers all at once. Even a being with four arms couldn't possibly fend off dozens, or even over a hundred, simultaneous laser attacks.

"IMPUDENT WOOOOORMS!"

Turned out he could fend off quite a few. His swords deflected dozens of the lasers, sending them right back at the battle bots, which

started exploding. One hit wouldn't take them down, but the damage definitely added up.

And while the lasers he *couldn't* fend off did, in fact, hit him…

"They're not very effective."

It wasn't like the laser fire was doing *nothing*. Any wounds he received regenerated quickly, and it didn't look like they had any effect on the rocky parts at all.

"Indeed," Serena said. "That rocky armor is a problem, not to mention his regenerative powers. Plasma weapons might work, but they're slow. He would simply evade them."

"You're gonna tell me swords are the only option, aren't you?"

"Exactly. Let's do this." Serena pulled her sword from its sheath and stepped forth.

"Man, I don't wanna…" I reluctantly followed, whipping out my own pair of swords.

* * *

"Lieutenant Colonel!"

A sword closed in, trailed by hurricane-force winds. I parried with the short sword in my left hand before striking the rocky arm with the longer one in my right. The sword dug into the beast's arm but not deep enough. It felt like my sword might break if I pushed any further, so I quickly pulled back.

"What—?!" Serena stooped low to evade a roundhouse kick. "What's the matter?!"

As the behemoth turned, he swung a sword—no, two swords—at her. However, she sliced her own weapon horizontally, evading one blow and deflecting the other. She didn't have much breathing room at all.

"Maybe you should—" *Clang!* "Reconsider the idea—" *Clang!* "Of capturing him alive!" I urged her to reconsider our strategy as I parried the continued thrusts of the two arms he *wasn't* attacking her with.

It would be impossible to capture this four-armed creature—who we believed to be Goeritz, despite his lack of human features—without wounding him. It wasn't that he was holding four swords; they were fused to his arms. Besides, I doubted he had the mental acuity to accept defeat in the first place.

"DIIIIIIIIIIE!"

Apparently, it was time to ignore Serena and attack me. The beast slashed wildly at me with all four of its arms.

I held my breath, and the world slowed to a crawl. I stepped forward, evading one slow yet destructive slash, before squatting to evade a second that came at me from the side in an attempt to slice straight through my stomach. The third attack, a diagonal thrust from above, I parried with my short sword. The fourth sword's arc shifted just before it could reach me, the monster stopping his attack. *Tch. I would've cut your wrist right off if you'd kept going like that.* However, I had managed to weave through his attacks and was now in striking range.

Reacting to the sudden attack, he attempted to hit me with a knee strike that may as well have been a battering ram.

"GRAAAAAAAAH?!"

It was really pretty careless of him. I timed a right-handed swing with my sword to his counterattack, burying my sword deep into the area just above his knee. Pitch-black blood spewed from the wound. I jumped and rolled to one side to get out of the splash zone as he fell backward.

It didn't matter how ridiculous a monster was. If it had legs and used muscles to move, then it wouldn't be able to stand if you cut above the knee—the quadricep—all the way to the bone. This was an ironclad rule. At least for bipeds.

Lieutenant Colonel Serena immediately seized this opportunity.

"Raaaaah!" She swung her sword repeatedly, cutting the swords off each of his arms. Then, together, we removed his limbs entirely.

"Looks like he's done for. So, what's the plan? 'Cause, uh, the guy's gonna die from blood loss like this."

“Not necessarily.” Serena glared at the four severed sword-arms, never letting go of her sword. I followed her line of sight and saw the wounds slowly closing. *Ew, really? The bleeding already stopped.*

“So we’re really transporting him alive? People are gonna lose it when they see him.”

Serena looked fed up behind her transparent helmet. “We do what we must for the mission.”

Well, I’m sure the Imperial Fleet has some way to transport weird, dangerous life-forms safely. I don’t know or care how they do it. There’s no way in hell I’m gonna help with that part. Absolutely not. I refuse.

“Y’know, I’ve been thinking… Would these swords serve as evidence?” I asked.

“That they would,” Serena said. “We may be able to identify the owner by tracing their serial numbers, inscriptions, and manufacturers.”

She ordered her marines to prepare for the removal of the beast believed to be Goeritz.

Four swords, huh? If Goeritz originally used two swords, then where did the other two come from? Hell, how many people were on that suppression ship?

“Do you really think this is Goeritz?”

“I can’t say for certain. Whoever he is, he hasn’t maintained his original form. It’s also possible that this beast was merely a distraction to cover his escape.”

Even Serena herself wasn’t fully convinced. If nothing else, this creature was almost certainly synthesized by combining multiple swordspeople—probably nobles—with Twisteds, based on the number of swords.

“But in that case,” she continued, “I’d have to wonder about the timeline. Even if the Twisteds didn’t attack them, there was no space on the suppression ship for land-based vehicles, and I doubt they had equipment that would work on Kormat IV to begin with. They most likely traveled to this structure on foot, and it would have taken quite some time to reach its center. If they had perfect control of the Twisteds, though, then we can’t

rule out the possibility that they rode Grapplers or Bulls, using them for high-speed travel…"

"So there's a physical and temporal constraint, huh? If that's the case, it sounds pretty unlikely that Goeritz escaped…"

"Probably not. We will continue our search either way, of course."

A bad feeling washed over me just as I thought, *Yeah, figures*. *No, no, of course I'm not… But just in case, I should make sure.*

"So…I'm good to go back to my actual mission, right?"

"No. Goeritz might still be here, after all." Serena smiled broadly at me.

You're still not letting me go? Actually, no, don't answer that. I don't wanna know anymore.

* * *

A thorough investigation eventually refuted the possibility that Goeritz might still be hiding in the facility. I had to admit it was a relief that we'd found the Twisted production plant in the back and confiscated the data on how to control them. It was still being analyzed, but if all went well, they'd be able to force a shutdown of all the Twisteds on the planet—or in other words, they'd order the Twisteds to commit suicide.

If that four-armed beast wasn't Goeritz, then we'd have to consider the possibility that he'd escaped somehow. Fortunately, the horde of battle bots now on the planet would take care of that. Serena told me that I might be called back to fight Goeritz, depending on how things went. *Frankly, I never want to land on a planet mid-terraforming ever again. No thanks.*

Ultimately, I had to spend three more days on Kormat IV, just until the facility's investigation was completed, before I was finally released from Serena's command and returned to my usual post, the *Krishna*.

Chapter 6:
Colony Planet Kormat III

After the landing mission on Kormat IV, we went back to our nice, calm—and maybe a little boring—days. Due to the destruction of their hideout, pirate activities had totally halted. The Twisteds on Kormat III and IV were all forcefully shut down, too, thanks to the freshly analyzed data. That meant every threat was gone, and colonization work was currently proceeding without a hitch.

"Thus, peace returned once more to the Kormat System, and under the guidance of a certain young Dalenwald lady, its residents took one bold step toward progress."

"What are you monologuing about now?" Elma asked me, irritated.

"Kind of an…autobiography? Allen suggested I do it. Apparently, there's a big demand for mercenary autobiographies. People treat them like novels."

"Ooh, yeah, I see those all over the place. They're all clearly exaggerating their exploits."

"I dunno… I think Master Hiro's exploits already look exaggerated, even when he only tells the truth," Mimi said wryly.

"So true."

People would no doubt think I was full of crap the moment they read about me, a spaceship fighter, landing on a planet mid-terraform and using swords instead of guns. Common sense here in the Grakkan Empire said that nobody could use swords. Well, except for nobles. Sure, any idiot could swing a sword. It's not like they were any less sharp if a regular nobody wielded them. If you wanted to use your sword to deflect lasers or reflect laser fire back at your enemy, you needed to splurge on bodily augmentation. And that was impossible to afford if you weren't a noble. Even though I could do it without any of that, somehow.

"And how often he runs into trouble…" Elma added.

“It can’t possibly be karma. I run into so much trouble that I can only believe I’m cursed.”

“Ah ha ha… W-well, at least you have no shortage of work.”

Mimi had a point; there was always some kind of reward in the end. I’d get great crew members like Mimi and Elma, tons of cash, a mothership with great mechanics, huge awards, first-class citizenship, landowner rights, gateway privileges, and the like. Things were going great in that sense, just in the most exhausting way possible.

In his seat at the back of the *Krishna*’s cockpit, Zwya swiped at his tablet. “You know, I’d love to have more usable footage,” he complained.

And what do you want me to do about it?

“Pirate activity is on the decline,” I told him. “I doubt there’ll be any photo ops any time soon.”

“They can’t sell off loot if they don’t have a hideout, no matter how many passenger ships they attack,” Elma explained. “The only pirates who’d work in the Kormat System right now are ones who’ve gone broke or the ones grabbing a little loot on their way to another system.”

“Hmm? What does that mean?” Zwya asked interestedly. It seemed he wasn’t too well-versed in the pirate lifestyle.

“Pirate hideouts basically act as physical black markets,” I said. “Pirates attack merchant and passenger ships for loot and slaves, bring them back to their hideout, and sell them off there.”

“They don’t sell them for Ener, though,” Elma added. “They barter for easily sellable Rare Metal, everyday goods, and luxury items. Scummy merchants buy the accumulated loot in bulk, then sell it. And all right out in the open, too.”

“If you attack and destroy one of their hideouts, both the pirates and the black-market merchants go down. It deals major damage to pirates and black-market merchants in surrounding systems too.”

“I see. But based on what you’re saying, that would make the black-market merchants the root of this evil. Defeating pirates is important, naturally, but wouldn’t it be better to expose the black-market merchants?”

That was a good question. Cutting off the roots was more efficient than pruning the ends, after all.

"How many merchants—merchant *ships*—do you think are out there in space?" I began my explanation. "And medium ones. And small ones. *And* self-employed businesspeople doing business on their own solo ship. Do you think you can check every single one of them for pirate-sourced goods? Even if you did, you might not even know what to look for."

There was a moment's pause. "That would be difficult."

"Plenty of shops in colonies sell goods from suspicious sources, you know. The reality is that there are small colonies and stations way out on the frontier that rely on black-market merchants. Heck, some of those merchants even do business with people planetside."

Zwya scratched his mane, which shone like fire. "That's a lot to parse…"

In the end, you *need* traveling merchants if you want to run a station or colony. Very few of them could become truly self-sustaining. Just about every colony and station, big or small, traded with others to get their residents the proper necessities. Suspicious or not, neither stations nor colonies could afford to be picky when it came to merchants. If they provided goods you needed at a reasonable price, then you had to overlook some things here and there.

"These societal problems are too much for a single mercenary to fix," he finally agreed.

"Depending on how you think about it, it's *because* of those problems that we even get work and the chance to make things better," Elma said with a shrug.

If pirates disappeared tomorrow, us mercs would starve. Well, if they *did* really disappear, I'd probably have to be a space-beast hunter or do mercenary work in the truest sense of the word—a sell-sword for international conflicts. Not literally, of course, since I'd probably be using a spaceship and laser cannons instead of my sword.

"Uh, okay, let's not talk about this high-minded stuff anymore," I cut in. "Let's talk about something more…low-minded!"

“Low-minded?”

“Like our current reward scheme or something!”

“How is that low-minded?” Elma glared at me, but I ignored it. At least it was a much more immediate, less high-minded discussion than social issues rooted in space piracy.

“Um, so we’re getting a base sum of 300,000 Ener,” I explained. “And we’re guaranteed a negotiable minimum of one million if we’re needed for something else. We were hired for thirty days at a minimum, and today is day twenty. So that’s a minimum of nine million, all told.”

“We were sent out for the air strike on Kormat III, so that will be a one-million-Ener bonus,” Mimi added.

“I wonder how they’ll handle the Kormat IV landing,” Elma said. “Given the risk to Hiro’s life, I say we squeeze them for three mil.”

“Assuming that works out, we’re up to nine million plus another four million makes thirteen million. Oh, and we’re guaranteed a million from the attack on the pirate base, too, so that’s fourteen. We’ll get the pirate bounties and kill rewards on top of that, which will probably be…say… another five and a half million? Plus seven million more from repairing and selling off those ships. I don’t know how much more we’ll earn in the next ten days. I’m expecting we’ll see a decrease.”

“All together, the total is about 26,650,000 Ener. That really is a *rough* estimation, though, so there’s room for error.”

“Include bounties and ship sales over the next ten days, and we may go over thirty million. There are way fewer pirates now, so we shouldn’t expect an increase in bounty earnings.”

“Thirty million Ener in one month…” Zwya trailed off. “That’s incomprehensible. What will you use all that money for?”

I puffed out my chest proudly. “My goal is to build a fancy detached house on a residential planet, so I can live freely and luxuriously until the day I die!”

“That’s quite a dream. But…”

“But?”

“You could achieve your goal with this mission’s earnings alone, couldn’t you? And you have first-class citizenship rights, too, don’t you?” Zwya gave me a quizzical look.

What? No, of course I can’t. Building a house on a residential planet would cost a hundred million. Hang on, wait… Buying first-class citizenship rights costs a whole lotta money, but if you have that already, then all you need is money for the land and construction. That means…

I gasped. “It could work, after all!”

“Yeah, probably?”

“I think so, too.”

Elma and Mimi confirmed my suspicions.

Huh? So I’ve achieved my goal without even realizing it? Wow, am I really that slow on the uptake?

* * *

“You didn’t realize until now?”

“I thought you were ignoring it on purpose!”

“Cut it out! Your words are like daggers right to my heart!”

Let me make some excuses here in my own defense. Yes, I did remember that I had first-class citizenship rights, thanks to the emperor’s tournament. It’d just slipped my mind because I was so focused on being able to use gateways freely. Also, most of my attention had been focused on Mei’s hellish training and Mimi’s shocking background reveal, so I had no time to fantasize about my ultimate goal. Then we’d ended up taking on this new job directly after that.

“So, is our Gold Star hero going to retire? Seems a little early, no?” Zwya joked.

“I mean, I could…”

He wasn’t wrong. Yes, once we finished this job, I would probably be able to buy land and build a detached home with a yard. I had enough

money to live comfortably after that, too. I'd live a nice, comfy life with Mimi, Elma, and Mei… That sounded nice. Not too bad at all.

"But it sounds a little boring, doesn't it?" I said.

"Boring, he says!"

"I just think it's too early to retire and settle down. There are still places out there I want to see. I just don't think being lazy for the rest of my life is for me, you know?"

That was genuinely how I felt. I certainly didn't mind spending leisure time with the girls, and I'd be overjoyed if I had kids with Mimi and Elma. But that didn't mean I was ready to start that life as soon as this job was done.

"Anyway, none of that's going to happen until I've talked things over with Mimi, Elma, and Mei. Tina and Wiska deserve a say too. It wouldn't be a bad idea to figure out where I want to build my home, even if we're not retiring yet."

Depending on what we decided, securing land first might be a good idea. If we did that, we could build a home whenever, totally at our leisure. We had plenty of money, so we might as well buy a big lot. *Oh, but that'll cost more in taxes, won't it?* We'd have to discuss that, too.

"But most of all…"

"Most of all?"

"I haven't found my soda. I might be able to live comfortably on a planet now, sure, but I can't truly kick back and relax without my beloved soda."

"Oh…"

"Riiight… That 'soda' stuff you won't shut up about."

Mimi and Elma nodded in understanding…and a healthy dose of exasperation. *Neither of you get just how much I* need *that soda! It's as precious to me as life-giving water itself.*

"What's this 'soda' you speak of?" Zwya asked.

"Oh, you're interested in soda?!" I turned my seat around to explain. "Well—oof!"

Elma kicked my seat, spinning me back to my original position. *Now that's just rude.*

"He'll never shut up about it, so don't ask. Here's the short version: it's apparently a sweet, carbonated drink with artificial flavoring."

"Carbonated drink?"

"It's a strange kind of beverage that fizzes when you drink it," Mimi added. "But due to how it's made, it explodes if you open it in a spaceship or colony."

"Whoa, that sounds scary."

"It isn't scary," I insisted. "I promise it's not dangerous. It's not scary at all!"

Tch. So it really is an obscure drink in this universe. Not just soda, either, but carbonated drinks in general…

On top of that, the ability to cook normal foods like meat, vegetables, and seafood was seen as so niche that only specialists would attempt it. The food situation in this universe was a complete mystery to me. Maybe it was just the result of extreme efficiency improvements in the process of space flight that led people to forget about the basics, like non-food-cartridge-based cooking and carbonated drinks.

Zwya hummed thoughtfully. "You know, you may find what you're looking for if you go to either a home star system that treasures ancient traditions or a frontier planet newly incorporated into the Empire."

I whipped my seat around to face him again. "Okay, tell me more."

He smirked, showing off a sharp fang. Clearly this was the reaction he'd expected.

"I'd be happy to, but I need some information in return."

"Go on."

"Hmm… Say, you seemed awfully close to that Imperial Fleet Lieutenant Colonel. Tell me a bit about your relationship with her, and I'll give you what you want."

"Sure."

Info on Serena was a small price to pay for a lead on soda. It didn't hurt me one bit, so I was ready to spill all the beans she wanted.

Huh? My promise to Serena? But soda*! I'm sure it's fine as long as I don't show him the video of Serena getting crazy drunk. I'll just tell him how we met and what we've done together so far. It's not like I'm leaking any secrets.*

"How about you share first?" I urged.

"Okay. Basically, any race or ethnicity's home star system will usually have a surprising number of traditional foods and specialty products. Chefs who are employed by nobles and upper-class, wealthy folk are typically master cooks of that planet's specialty and traditional foods."

"I see. You think my soda might be one of those rare foods and specialties?"

"That's right. The Grakkan Empire contains a few home star systems like that, and the Empire's newly added, hyper-remote sectors—what we call edge worlds—should have a lot of obscure products, too."

"Edge worlds, huh?"

Edge worlds weren't just remote sectors, like the Tarmein System, which could be likened to rural areas on Earth, or frontier sectors that neighbored other Empires. They were on the edge of the entire known universe, the absolute front lines of the ever-expanding Empire. Nobody knew what, or who, might lay beyond them.

"I bet we'd have no shortage of work in edge worlds, but…"

"The Imperial Fleet doesn't have much of a presence near edge worlds, so there are kinda too many pirates," Elma said with a sigh.

"What's wrong with that?" Mimi tilted her head questioningly at our reactions.

"There's little to no Imperial Fleet presence around edge worlds, so pirates can just call for reinforcements when they run up against a strong foe," I explained.

"Huh? But… Oh, I see. Because the fleet won't come."

"Exactly."

If space pirates called for reinforcements in a system patrolled by the Imperial Fleet, the fleet would come running. But in edge worlds, the Imperial Fleet had their hands full defending the colonies and stations, allowing pirates to brazenly overwhelm any prey they set their eyes on with sheer numbers.

"We'd have our pick of planets, sure, but it's risky."

"No matter how strong Hiro and the *Krishna* may be, even they have their limits," Elma agreed.

It was high-risk, but it was also highly profitable, so there were merchants who made their living going to edge worlds. Typically, merchants working in places like that traveled in large fleets. Those going to edge worlds tended to travel in what I'd liken to armed convoys, too. They heavily armed their merchant ships *and* hired escorts, all for the sake of resisting large-scale pirate attacks.

"Acting on our own would be risky, but there would be plenty of bodyguard work. Maybe we can travel the edge worlds as an armed convoy escort. Throw in the *Black Lotus*'s weapons and carrying capacity, and it might even be accepted as a supply ship."

"Yeah. Selling our services to armed convoys near edge worlds might be a good idea," Elma agreed.

"That does sound good, but shouldn't we start searching safer home planets in Empire territory first?" Mimi suggested.

"Yeah, fair point."

Exploring edge worlds as a member of an armed convoy sounded fun, but the natural first step was to wander around Imperial territory. We'd have to choose a planet to build a house on, after all.

"I trust we can expect much more to come from Captain Hiro, then?" Zwya smiled.

"Seems like it. I figure we're too young to retire peacefully, anyway," I said with a shrug.

This would all have to wait at least ten more days until our work in the Kormat System was done. It seemed unlikely that the situation would

call for our contract to be extended, so having our next goal planned out would be a good idea.

We were going to look for a planet to build a house on, search for my carbonated salvation, and see the sights along the way. That seemed like a good rough plan.

* * *

A few days passed by smoothly. We cleaned up the lingering pirates, captured their ships, handed over those who'd surrendered for an extra bonus, and sold off the captured ships. Our mechanics had been the busiest of us by far over the past few days.

"Go, go! You can do it, girls!" I cheered sarcastically.

"I appreciate it, but we've got our limits too, y'know," Tina complained.

"You have gotten very precise, so there isn't too much damage," Wiska complimented me. "This is easy work, comparatively speaking."

"I can be considerate sometimes." I destroyed the pirates' main thrusters before they could escape, dealing gradual damage while urging them to surrender, and finally destroying just the cockpit block alone when they refused. That made repairs and refitting easy.

"The *Black Lotus* sure was a good purchase. Thanks to you two, it'll pay for itself in no time."

"Our pockets are deeper than ever, too!"

"Though the work's harder than it was at Space Dwergr."

"Sorry about that. Really, sorry." I could do nothing but apologize.

Uh, look, let me know if you have any suggestions for workplace improvements, okay? New tools, anything like that is fine. I can't give you less work, though. I mean, I can consider it. I can… Hey, stop swinging those wrenches at me like that! Stop it right now!

* * *

After being (physically) persuaded by the mechanics, I scurried out of the hangar and escaped to the *Black Lotus* lounge. The media reps from all three companies were there relaxing. They greeted me as I entered.

"Well, Captain Hiro, looks like your job is nearly done, eh? That means ours is coming to a close as well."

"It's a shame to have to leave the *Black Lotus*. It's like a high-class hotel."

"It's so spacious, and there's such delicious food…"

"Yeah? I bet you can't normally afford this luxury with Formalhaut's pay, can you?"

"Oh?"

"You wanna say that again?"

Fomalhaut's Zwya and Nyatflix's Nya seemed like they were about to get violent, so I ignored them and decided to talk to Space Dwergr's Wamdo and Mobius Strip's Allen instead.

"Where should I let you all off?" I asked them. "You're not gonna ask me to take you all the way to the capital, are you?"

"That won't be necessary. There are regular flights from the Kormat System to the Dexar System. We can catch one headed to the capital from there."

"Aha. So we don't need to worry about seeing you home, then."

"Though we do hate to leave…"

"That's how it goes when you live somewhere for a month. I bet the *Black Lotus* will feel awfully quiet without you."

We'd had five people per company here with us over the last month, meaning twenty media staff members had been staying in the *Black Lotus* and *Krishna*.

The *Black Lotus* was too big for our normal gang of six—Mimi, Elma, Mei, Tina, Wiska, and me. Things felt livelier while the media staff

were on board. Someone was always hanging around in the lounge, and we often ate at around the same time, so meals were loud and boisterous. Losing twenty people all at once would leave the place feeling very empty.

"Ha ha ha! I'm sure you'd love to have us gone so you can flirt with Miss Mimi and Miss Elma out in the open, no?"

"I'd be lying if I said you were wrong there."

"They say that behind every great man is a great woman…or two, or three," Wamdo commented. "But what about Space Dwergr's own mechanics?"

"C'mon, I'm not that unprincipled."

"Really? They're young and beautiful, though."

"That's the thing," Allen answered with a wry chuckle. "They look a little *too* young to us non-dwarves…"

"Yeah, what he said." I agreed. They were definitely cute, and they had their own charms, but they looked way too young… I knew they were proper, grown dwarven women, of course, but I couldn't get past their appearance. "Besides, it's not like I have to be with a woman just because she's on my ship. They have the right to be with whoever they want, after all."

"You're more of a romantic than I thought."

"Frankly, you don't seem to have the common mercenary's mentality. You really are more…stoic. And pure, in a way. Or perhaps immature."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?!"

Wamdo and Allen laughed. *Mm, yeah… I'm going to miss having these dumb conversations with other dudes.*

* * *

After leaving the lounge, I returned to the *Krishna*'s cockpit, where I found Mimi and Elma ready to discuss our future plans.

“Are we going to take a short break at Kormat Prime before we depart?” Mimi asked.

“Eh, I say we take as much of a break as we want,” Elma shrugged. “We don’t need to hurry. We’re finishing up a big job, so nobody’s gonna kill us for taking it easy for a while.”

“I don’t want to kick everyone out just like that either. We’ll hang around at Kormat Prime until the media people secure a ship to the Dexar System. Until then, I figure we might as well rest up and figure out where we want to go next.”

“I think that’s a fine idea,” Mei agreed through the cockpit’s screen. Mimi and Elma didn’t raise any objections.

We still had a few days left on our initial contract with the Dalenwald family, but at this rate, there wouldn’t be an extension. As such, Wamdo and the others were already planning their route home. There wasn’t any guarantee they’d have arrangements by the time the contract ended, though, so I’d given them permission to stay on the *Black Lotus* as long as they needed.

“In the meantime, I’m thinking about picking a plot of land for our home… I guess anywhere is fine, right?” I mused.

“What kind of place would be most comfortable for us?” Mimi asked.

“I need a place with a nice climate,” Elma said. “Extreme temperature differences just aren’t for me. I want to be in a star system with good security, too; we don’t want to be randomly attacked by pirates or wrapped up in wars, do we?”

“Yeah, true. I’d like to live on a planet where the only things falling from the sky are rain and snow, not orbital bombardment,” I said.

“That would be awful!” Mimi firmly agreed.

“In that case, we want a planet with solid security and climate control through terraforming,” Elma recounted. “Honestly, if you wanna use your connections, you could find a planet in Count Dalenwald’s territory pretty fast.”

“It is very likely that they will give you preferential treatment in regard to pricing and taxation,” Mei chimed in. “It would benefit them, as

well."

"Really? How so?"

"If you were to build a residence on a planet in the Kormat System and make it your headquarters, they would be able to count you among available forces when space pirates need dispatching. Even if they don't, they can still expect that you'll regularly hunt pirates, contributing to the safety of the star system. You also have the option of serving the Dalenwald family directly, which they would naturally welcome. In short, they have no reason not to treat you well."

"Makes sense…"

That sounded like the sort of thing nobles would think. My skills were definitely in demand, though, so I was proud of that. But I couldn't get carried away; I had to be humble. *C'mon, I'm not that great. Pssh.*

"Okay, then I'll discuss purchasing land with Chris later. Oh, right, what about our next destination? Any ideas?"

"Hmm, that's a difficult question," Mimi agreed. "I've been researching mother planets found in the Empire after our last conversation."

"Oh ho. What'd you learn?"

"There are a few places we haven't been to yet. There's the Leafil System, where the elves hail from. Then there's the Galakis System, where the dwarves came from. The Amarzul System is home to the repirika. And there's the tecta's home system too, the Sirrus System."

"Oh, I've been to Leafil II," Elma cut in. "Mom and Dad took me there when I was a little girl. I was born and raised in the Imperial capital, but they say everyone needs to go and explore their roots at some point."

"Whoa."

So mother systems really are special, huh?

"I've never given mother systems much thought, but I really was moved when we landed at the capital."

"Is that so?" That was a feeling I didn't know at all. I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to go back to Earth with the *Krishna*, but it'd probably

cause a huge ruckus if I did. *Do NOT go near Earth, or they'll chase you with fighter jets*.

"Speaking of…" Elma began.

"Yeah?"

"Remember when you drank that thing on Sierra III and made a weird face before making me drink it, too? That smelled a lot like a medicinal concoction I had to drink on Leafil II."

"Interesting…"

As I recalled, I had Elma try root beer. Root beer was originally a drink made of various herbs and spices that later branched out into many unique recipes. One example would be soda. In other words, the elven mother system's Leafil II might have just been the foundation for the birth of soda.

"All right," I said. "We're going to the Leafil System."

"That was fast."

"Maybe I shouldn't have run my mouth," Elma sighed. "Meh, I'm sure Hiro can handle it now."

What did Elma just say? Should I be concerned? Eh, it doesn't matter as much as the possible existence of soda. What if Leafil II had some kind of plant that was like soda fruit? What if there was a soft drink that's like soda? I was laser focused on that singular issue.

* * *

While we spent our remaining contract time at Kormat Prime, we received a work request from Chris.

"An inspection?" I asked.

"Yes. We've disposed of the Ixamals' biological weapons. Now that the site has been secured, I'd like to inspect it myself. I'll need an escort."

"I see."

That wasn't unusual, especially since we were certain the site was safe now. I just didn't know how the colonists would feel about inspecting it *after* the fact. Chris had worked hard to make it safe up to this point, so maybe it'd all work out in the end. She could go around telling people that everything was safe, and they wouldn't have to worry anymore. In that case, though, I'd think it would be better to take a Dalenwald family knight and perform a formal ceremony, not bring me. Not that I, an outsider, had a say in any of this.

"It's not like we're doing air raids," I said. "It's within the bounds of the contract, so of course, we agree. Our schedules are free, so we can leave whenever's convenient for you."

We had daily patrols at set times, but we'd hardly detected any pirates in the past few days. Besides, a request directly from our client would obviously supersede any previously scheduled patrol. All pretenses aside, going on a little tour guarding Chris would be a lot more fun than these fruitless patrols.

"Lovely," Chris replied. "Then let's go right now. I'll come straight to you, so please make sure you're ready."

"Right now? All right, but you've already settled whatever formalities you need to deal with, right? I'm gonna be mad if people start thinking I've kidnapped you. I'm recording this conversation as we speak, too."

"I'll be there in an hour," she corrected herself with a smile. *Hey! That's not funny! No more jokes, please.*

"Please don't be a bad girl. I like cute, honest Chris."

"You're making me blush."

"Sometimes, I feel like we're having two different conversations."

Chris giggled on the holo-display, apparently overjoyed by our exchange. I was no comedian, but I genuinely wanted to make her laugh whenever possible. She'd just been so stressed lately.

"Anyway, I'll get the *Krishna* ready for launch," I said. "What do we want to do about the media?"

“Hmm, I think I’d like them to stay out of it today. I’ll be in disguise, after all.”

“Got it. You okay with Mimi and Elma joining us?”

“Yes. Take good care of me, okay?” With that, Chris hung up.

Well, now that that’s decided, I’ll have to invite Mimi and Elma. They’re off somewhere at the moment, though, so I’ll just send them a summary over our messaging app.

* * *

“Please take good care of me today, everyone,” Chris smiled.

I couldn’t help but hold my head in consternation when I saw her getup. Knee-length shorts, a sturdy-looking shirt, a jacket, and uh, some kind of headset gadget with cat ears on it. She was also armed with a laser gun on her hip and a large combat knife—probably similar to the swords Serena and I used. Apart from the kitty cat ears, it was the full-on mercenary look.

“Wow! Chris, you’re so cute!” Mimi’s eyes sparkled.

“Well, at least she *looks* like a mercenary.” Elma inspected her clothes, genuinely impressed in her own way.

“That’s your disguise?” I asked.

“It is. I thought this would look more natural if I were going to be traveling with you.”

“And you prepared it in advance and everything… A little too thorough, don’t you think?”

“I am a noble, after all.” Chris smirked and puffed out her chest proudly. The logic was incomprehensible, but I found myself oddly convinced. Maybe she meant that, because she was a noble, she could think faster than us plebs and therefore prepared for a wide variety of possibilities more thoroughly than everybody else.

“Okay, this works. But are you sure you want to go take a look around this place as a mercenary and not a noble?”

“Yes, that’s the plan. You should be given permission to land any minute now.”

A beep came from my jacket pocket just as she finished the sentence. It seemed my terminal had received something.

“Excuse me. Uh, let’s see… Unlimited landing permits?”

“Yes. As the name implies, you’ll be free to land on Kormat III as often as you want in the future. It is within my rights to grant you the permit, so I did just that.”

“Unlimited… Well, sure, I’ll take that. Thanks!”

“Of course. I’ll keep it safe for you to come home any time you want.”

What does she mean by that? I mean, I can guess, but I’m scared to ask. Is Chris actually some kind of obsessive yandere type? It feels like she’s using her status to remove every obstacle between us she can think of…

“Anyway, now that you’re here, let’s get going. You don’t want to run into the media, do you?” I said, glancing at the entrance to the hangar.

“Right.”

All the media staff sat silently there. Some put their hands together in prayer, some kneeled and gazed desperately at us, and others even bowed their heads to the floor. Mei kept a close eye on all of them, so I probably didn’t need to worry about them recording Chris right now.

“By the way, what of those two dwarves?” Chris asked.

“They’re dead tired, so I’m letting them rest.”

“D-dead…? Poor girls.”

At this time of day, they were probably either still asleep or had just woken up and started drinking. They didn’t get drunk, even when they drank to cure a hangover, but I still didn’t want them to meet Chris stinking of liquor. They’d have to sit this one out.

“Now, would you like a tour of the ship?” I offered. “I’m sure you’re already familiar with it, though.”

“That is true.” Chris peered around inside the *Krishna*, a nostalgic look on her face. The interior hadn’t changed since the last time she was on board, so it was probably exactly the way she remembered.

“So, you said you wanted to do an inspection. Got any particular plans?”

“Nothing special. I’d just like to see the development in its current state for my own eyes.”

“Okay, then we’ll want a good excuse to visit the settlement. Can we just say we got permission to go sightseeing on our day off?”

“Landings aren’t being granted for such reasons at this moment,” she replied. “I guess it might be plausible if we call it a test case, though.”

“You don’t get to see the early stages of a settlement very often, so I’m sure the sights will be interesting. I don’t know if the colonists would like being considered a tourist attraction, though…”

Having people see you as a tourist attraction while you were working your ass off didn’t seem like it’d give you the warm fuzzies, but the community-wide benefits of tourism might outweigh the annoyance. However, their job right now was to develop this area to create a new home for their people. They couldn’t afford tourists getting in their way.

“While you’re at it, you should think of a sightseeing plan. There’s nothing wrong with having one, whether or not we use it.”

“Okay, let’s do that. I’ll pass that information on to the settlement’s chief.” Chris sat in the sub-operator’s seat and turned on her terminal.

She works fast, I thought to myself as I performed the *Krishna*’s startup checks. It was in perfect condition, as usual.

“I’m sorry to ask you to take us all there on a whim like this, but I’ve found a colonist city that will accept us, so let’s go there,” she said.

“A colonist city?” I asked back. I hadn’t heard that phrase before.

“I hear that’s what people commonly call colonist ships that have landed on a developing planet, as the ship serves as a center of the colonization effort first and foremost.”

“Huh. Okay, then we’ll designate that as our destination. What are the coordinates?”

“Sending them now.”

“Confirmed. Leave the navigation to me!” Mimi was even more eager than usual. Was she just happy to be with Chris on the *Krishna* again?

Elma looked at her, exasperated, but I couldn't blame the girl for being excited. Heck, even I was getting a little excited.

"Mimi, take care of the launch procedures for us," I requested.

"Yes, Captain! Mei, please open the hatch for us."

"Understood. Please be careful, everyone," Mei said on the main screen.

I raised my hand in response. After confirming that Elma had changed the generator output to travel mode, I reached for the controls.

"Launch request complete. Displaying guide," Mimi announced.

"Got it. Time to launch, then."

When the *Black Lotus*'s hatch opened, I launched the *Krishna*. *All right, safety first today. We leave carefully; we land on Kormat III carefully. I know just how harsh the conditions are on a planet mid-terraforming, but how are they after the process is done? I'm pretty excited to find out.*

* * *

"Now that I get a good look at it, it's really pretty."

"Yeah… You didn't really have an opportunity to see the sights last time," Mimi said with a wry smile.

She was right. The colonist ship—now the colonist city—had been attacked by a horde of Twisteds. We'd been forced to take out the *Krishna* for a little aerial support and a full-on air raid, which was extremely rare for us.

"Chris…looks pretty okay, huh?"

"This isn't my first time landing on a planet."

Elma tried to be considerate toward Chris, but Chris herself didn't seem bothered in the slightest. She'd landed on the Sierra System resort planet with us on the *Krishna*, and noble girls probably experienced planetary landings often.

"I've set our navigation point," Mimi said.

“Thanks. I’ll start flying that way.” I flew the *Krishna* per the guide displayed on the main screen. Before long, a manmade structure the size of a small mountain came into view. “Wow. It changed a lot in no time flat.”

“It was rounder before it entered the atmosphere, wasn’t it?” Mimi asked.

The colonist ship, which had previously looked like a bullet or an elongated dome, had changed shape. Only the foundation was left, save for a tall tower standing at the center.

Around the tower were several perfunctory structures of varying size. They were nothing to look at, really; just a bunch of square buildings lined up neatly. They were perfect cubes, like tofu.

“I bet Tina and Wiska would know. Were the parts they lopped off used as materials for the structures around it?”

“Yes, that is correct,” Chris answered. “The facilities around the colonist ship were built with the materials stripped from it. They’re typically housing facilities.” As the leader of this colonization project, it seemed she’d cultivated some knowledge on the subject.

“Just housing, huh? That’s kind of surprising. Here I expected some more, I dunno, high-tech or sophisticated facilities.”

“Those will come in due time, but housing must come first. A colony needs people, and people need places to live. And besides, each wave of settlers brings more supplies with them. Soon, we will work toward self-sufficiency in food production and continue to make improvements to their living conditions. The eventual goal is to create an industry that produces as many valuable goods as possible. Then we can export as well as import.”

“What would those valuable goods be?”

“Mainly organic products like livestock and crops. Those tend to be in short supply in space colonies.”

“Livestock… Oh, like that giant caterpillar thing they served at the party.” It was a specialty product of this system, and despite its appearance —and Chris’s horror—it was delicious.

“Well, yes… Those. They’re excellent livestock,” Chris monotoned. “Not only can they be eaten, they also produce lovely, high-quality silk.

And their usefulness doesn't stop when they become adults, either."

Chris had a thousand-yard stare. She might understand that they were useful animals from a logical point of view, but she still couldn't bring herself to like them.

Wow, so those things really are larva? Do they turn into huge butterflies, or what?

"Our landing request was approved," Mimi said. "Displaying guide now."

"Ooh, a landing pad? I wonder if that's for supply drops," I mused.

"Probably," Elma replied. "Chris, you mentioned that transport ships come regularly, right?"

I glanced at Chris, and she nodded in response to our conversation. *Well, when you're setting up colonization bases, it makes sense to build a port first. You need a method of both transportation and trade, after all.*

"Anyway, let's get to landing, shall we?"

"Okay! This will be my first time seeing the settlement with my own eyes, so I'm very excited."

"I just hope it's interesting enough to live up to your expectations."

Chris's eyes sparkled with excitement, but Elma seemed to have low expectations. It was still in the early stages of development, and we probably couldn't expect much in the way of local goods, so her reaction was understandable. They probably wouldn't have manufactured any of her beloved liquor, after all.

* * *

The landing pad in the colonist city supported auto-docking, so we were able to land with little effort.

"Ooh… The surface air is so refreshing and exhilarating!"

"Maybe that's the faint scent of flowers, or the breeze caressing your skin, or something," I said, looking up at the clear blue sky. "Man, looking

up at an endless sky instead of a ceiling really makes you feel free."

It wasn't entirely cloudless, but the humidity and temperature were just right. The weather was ideal, really. Was this another result of the terraforming process?

We looked around as we headed toward the landing pad gate, where we were greeted by a handful of locals.

"Welcome, welcome!" a middle-aged woman called out to us. She seemed to be their representative, based on their vibes. She was a kind-looking woman who gave off an extremely gentle air.

"Thanks. And thank you for accepting our sudden request so graciously. I'm Captain Hiro, owner and captain of the *Krishna* over there as well as a mercenary with the mercenary guild."

"Yes, I'm well aware. We watched the whole tournament over holo-stream, you know."

"Oh, uh… Not sure how to react to that," I said sheepishly. "Honestly, I'm a little embarrassed."

"Aw, our Gold-Star hero is just adorable, isn't he? That must be why these lovely women flock to him."

"Please don't tease me too much…" I didn't have it in me to get mad at such a sweet-looking older lady, and I quickly surrendered. You're done for if you lose your cool at times like this.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I was just so excited when I learned I'd be meeting someone so famous today. Can we assume you're here to tour the colony?"

"Sure am. I've taken an interest in terraformed planets. The surface feels so open and free, and the air is just so delicious and refreshing, right? I feel a little bad coming down here for fun while you're all so busy, but it was surprisingly easy to get my client's approval."

"Miss Christina is young, but she is wise. I'm sure there's a deeper meaning behind her actions." Her eyes flitted to Chris, just for an instant.

Had she figured it out? Or had Chris talked to her ahead of time? Chris might have changed clothes, but that didn't mean she was incognito. If you'd seen her face before and had a bit of imagination, it wouldn't be too difficult to see through her mercenary getup.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t introduced myself. How rude of me. I’m the Second Colonist City’s manager, Clara. It is such a pleasure to meet you! I hope you feel the same,” the middle-aged woman, Clara, said with an elegant smile.

I didn’t know how many people lived in this colonist city, but if she was the boss of every single one of them, then she was the kind of person I couldn’t let my guard down around.

* * *

Clara excused herself to attend to other business, leaving us four with the two men who would be our guides. One was a gentle-looking, middle-aged man, while the other was a little kid—sorry, a dwarf, apparently. Despite being a dwarf, he had the sort of smooth, hairless face that could be described as adorable. He was apparently the same age as Mimi, so he was just barely considered a legal adult in the Empire.

“Man… It’s not like we don’t have work to do,” the dwarf complained.

“This *is* our work for today, so you might as well quit complaining,” the older man said. “Sorry, Mister Mercenary. He’s just a kid, so I’ll have to ask you to forgive him.”

“I’m not complaining. We’re the ones forcing our way in on short notice.” I shrugged at the man, who apologized profusely. We probably *were* giving them extra work, so I couldn’t blame the dwarf boy for getting mad.

“Klein, stop bowing like—ow, ow!”

“Ha ha, excuse us for a moment.” The man named Klein dragged the dwarven boy a short distance away and scolded him in a hushed tone. “Be assertive, that’s fine. But at least consider who you’re talking to, you fool! That man is an honorary viscount. Don’t you see those swords?!”

Guys, you might wanna quiet down a little. I can hear everything you’re saying.

“Say what? Why would a noble be a merc?”

“He became a noble because he got a major award from the princess herself. Keep running your mouth, and he’ll slice you to pieces.”

Well, no, I wouldn’t kill him just for that. How short-tempered do you people think I am? Heck, do people just think mercenaries are bloodthirsty, savage brutes in general? Well, this brute does have a noble title, honorary or not, which is probably adding to the fear factor here.

“Sorry, but I can hear you guys. I have zero intention of swinging my swords around here. Can you guys just show us around? Or if we’re allowed to explore on our own, we’ll do that.”

“Ah, excuse us. Let’s get going. Come on, idiot, it’s time to go!”

“Ugh, fine…” The dwarven boy rubbed where he’d been smacked upside the head and glanced at the weapons on my hip.

I’m seriously not gonna use them. I promise. So stop worrying.

Then, he surveyed all four of us again before glaring at me one more time, as if about to click his tongue in irritation. *Ha ha ha! If Tina and Wiska were here, I bet he’d really do it.*

“By the way, what do you guys do here?” I asked them.

“You could call us jacks-of-all-trades,” the older man said. “We’re here to solve any and all problems that pop up on the ship—er, the city, that is.”

Was that some kind of department specialized to handle miscellaneous government tasks? “Hmm… So your local government has a department like that?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No, we’re not with the government. Though Clara does bring us in for work sometimes, like today.”

“Aha.” *So they’re sort of like private handymen. Can you make a living off of that here? Well, here they are, right before my eyes, so I guess you can.* “Where are you taking us first?”

“We’ll go through the residential area to reach the site. We’ve prepared transportation, so we won’t have to walk much.” Klein showed us to a place where a very simple vehicle was parked.

What is this? It kind of looks like a big inflatable boat with seats attached.

"I've never seen a vehicle like this before."

"Hate to say it, but it looks kinda cheap…"

"Small, too. I guess they emphasized keeping the cost low."

It was far cheaper than the recon vehicles used by mercenaries. Heck, the seats were fully exposed to the elements.

"Ha ha ha, well, the materials used for high-tech products have been allotted to more important needs," Klein explained. "These are made with the idea that we simply want to be able to transport a few people as needed. We'll sit in the front drivers' seats, so you all may sit in the back."

"I'll gladly take you up on that." Chris sat in the seat right behind the drivers' seats and looked up at me as she patted the one next to her. These boat-like vehicles could fit exactly six people, with two drivers' seats, two front passengers' seats, and two back passengers' seats.

"Yes, yes, as you wish. Girls, you mind sitting in the back?"

"Of course not."

"Whatevs."

Mimi and Elma solemnly boarded the vehicle without complaint. Once everyone was confirmed to be aboard, the middle-aged man began driving the…car?

"I wondered how this moved. So it floats," I noted. "This is weirdly high-tech for its size."

Chris nodded along with my murmurings. "This allows it to drive over rougher terrain. I bet they emphasized cost-performance and features over appearance."

"I just hate the dust that gets all over you since, y'know, no windshield," Elma said flatly behind me.

"But feeling the wind on your skin is fun!" Mimi chimed in excitedly.

I turned around and saw Mimi stretching out her arms and catching the wind in her hands. It wasn't exactly novel to me, but you didn't normally feel wind in colonies and spaceships, so it sure was for her. Even

such a little thing was so new and fresh to her. Looking back, we hadn't done any motorsports activities during our vacation in the resort system.

While I considered going to another resort system, the antigravity hovercraft left the landing pad and headed toward a group of structures around the base of the colonist ship that we'd seen from the *Krishna*.

"Wow, it's all so well-maintained."

"It's almost like a colony, just without the ceiling."

Mimi's comment was reasonable. This was probably a sort of urban area. The ground was paved with something like concrete and the buildings lining the street made it look like the commercial district of a trading colony. The large, billboard-like holo-display advertisements found on the building walls of colonies commercial districts were missing here, making it feel just a little desolate.

"Feels a little lacking without the billboards, doesn't it?" Elma noted, evidentially on the same wavelength. "Residential areas in colonies are like this, too," Mimi added.

"Yeah? Maybe there just aren't any stores worth advertising yet," I hypothesized.

"Entertainment facilities are probably not coming any time soon," Chris said.

"Hey now, it's not as if we don't have taverns and shops," the man driving the hovercraft replied cheerfully. "We'll get to those later, I promise."

He seemed like he was doing his best to lighten the mood, perhaps because I'd heard their tense whispering earlier. I didn't really care about any of that, but given his position, he was probably in a cold sweat.

"By the way, what kind of site are we visiting?" I asked.

"It's a food production facility. They're working at an urgent pace right now, so I think it's a worthwhile stop."

"Food production, huh?" Elma said disinterestedly, probably remembering our food cartridge factory tour. The one we'd seen was like a hydroponic culture farm, but what were they like on the surface? I was curious.

* * *

My first impression of the food production facility was extremely simple: “Hmm… This is a farm. It’s just a farm.”

I mean, the fields were well-plowed, but it was just a farm. Literally, a regular old farm. It wasn’t an especially large farm, either. I could tell it was bigger than a soccer field, but there were only six fields in total.

“Interesting! They grow them in the ground, like other plants,” Mimi noted.

“Yeah… This isn’t all that interesting.” Elma wasn’t wrong. There wasn’t anything interesting about looking at a plowed field; maybe it would’ve been more fun if we were watching big machines doing the tilling or something.

“Ah… Something’s coming from that way,” Chris pointed out.

That’s… Whoa, what are those? Objects the size of handballs were rolling toward us at high speed on top of the soft, plowed soil.

“Small agricultural bots, perhaps?”

“Looks like it.”

They passed by us at regular intervals. I couldn’t help but notice that nothing had changed, though.

“What are those things running around for?” I asked.

“Dunno. I’m not with the food production department, so I can’t answer that,” the dwarven boy replied, openly irritated. *If you’re not gonna be a guide, then why are you even here?*

“We’re supposed to meet up with someone who can explain these things, but…” Klein said, searching the field. “Ah, over there! That’s probably them.”

We drove on, watching the single-file line of robots, until we saw another antigravity hovercraft up ahead. This one was a two-seater, and in the passenger seat was some sort of large machine.

“Heeeey!” Klein called out to the vehicle from our drivers’ seat. “I’m Klein, the one who called earlier!”

The other driver raised their hand. “Oh, hello there!” they replied.

They sound awfully laid-back, I thought to myself, leaning forward to get a better look. The person driving was a tall man with a cheerful demeanor. *Wow, he’s big. He’s gotta be over two meters tall, easy.*

Fangs peeked out from behind his bottom lip when he smiled. “Are those the mercs you mentioned? Got a bunch of cute girls there… When you mentioned mercenaries, I thought they’d be all big and tough!”

Hmm, so he’s not human? Humans are the main race in the Empire, but there are a lot of others living here too. I’ve never really spoken to the other races much, but you tend to see them a lot when you go to the port districts of trading colonies. However, I’d never seen anyone quite like this guy.

Both vehicles parked and I got out, held out my hand, and introduced myself. “Nice to meet you. I’m Captain Hiro. Thank you for coming despite our sudden request.”

He returned the handshake and smiled gently. “Ooh, you look real familiar. You’re that merc who trounced all those nobles in the tournament, right? You’re tiny, but you’re strong. I’m Eifa of the Ragile clan. Glad to be working with you today.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

Hmm… Maybe being so well-known is convenient. Most people who know me from the tournament seem to have a positive impression of me. Well, if you can count being scared as a positive.

“Sorry to hit you with a question right away, but what were those little things rolling around?” I asked him.

“Oh, those are multipurpose agriculture bots. This is the primary unit,” he said, pointing with his thumb at the giant machine in the back of his vehicle. “The ones out there are the secondary operatives. You folks caught us in the middle of inspecting and adjusting the soil.”

“Adjusting?”

“Yeah. Gotta make sure it contains the right nutrients for crops, keep the pH balanced, stuff like that. We collect that data and adjust as needed.”

“That sounds like a lot of work. Wouldn’t hydroponic agriculture be easier?” Mimi asked, tilting her head.

The man burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! It sure would, but not all crops can be cultivated that way. Most of what we’re growing here aren’t very hydroponic-friendly.”

“Oh. I see.” *I hear that slight shift in your tone, Mimi.* “That means you’re prioritizing crops with high selling prices, then?”

“We have some that sell high, yeah. But they’re also nutritious and tasty. They haven’t been planted yet, though. It’s a shame we can’t share some with you.”

“It sounds like this isn’t your first time doing this work,” I said. “Have you done this elsewhere before?”

“My family’s been in this line of work for generations. I heard they were looking for agricultural workers for a newly terraformed planet, so I signed up. It’s my first time using a crazy machine like this, though. You don’t know how hard I studied.” Eifa puffed up and grinned proudly.

“So they brought experienced workers from other planets, huh?” Elma said. “Well, it’s not like every planet has a surplus of land.”

“You got that right. Where I come from, the first-born son inherits everything. I’m number four, so I’m not getting the farm. This colonization project was a real stroke of luck.”

“Wow. You come from a big family!” Mimi was oddly impressed. To be fair, families with four kids weren’t all that common in Japan either; most had one or two. Was that true for the Grakkan Empire, though?

“As you know, I’m one of three,” Elma told me. “Seems to me like families with one kid, like Chris, are the rarer ones.”

“I agree.”

“Really? I know a lot of other only children…” Chris recalled.

So nobles and colonists had different perceptions here. Interesting. However, Klein made a strange face when he heard them. Either he was real

quick on the uptake, or he was well-learned. Elma and Chris were about to blow their cover and reveal they were nobles if they kept chatting.

"By the way, did those agricultural bots create this farmland?" I asked, changing the subject. "They didn't look capable of digging up soil."

"Nah, the farms themselves are constructed by some molecular whatsit… Some kind of machine. They're tiny little machines like these. They light up and turn everything from weeds to trees into soft soil in no time."

Eifa's explanation was iffy at best; those machines must not have been his job. Either way, it sounded like they were incredible little machines that could clear and level land, lay fields, construct buildings, and all while fitting in the palm of your hand. *Oh, do they work like those material projectors the Imperial Fleet was using on Kormat IV?*

"Sounds convenient," I replied. "I bet they'd come in handy in our line of work too. Can I buy those somewhere?"

"I wonder…" Mimi said. "I'll have to look into it. Maybe survival kits include something like it."

"Thanks. I'll leave it to you, Mimi."

Chris looked like she wanted to cut in, but it'd be suspicious if she offered to get them for us. Realizing that, she swallowed her words and stayed silent.

Eifa taught us more about crops and agriculture after that. Then we left the farm—uh, "food production facility"—and headed to our next destination.

* * *

"You must be hungry."

Klein offered to treat us to a meal, so we agreed to go to the "city" proper—the base of the ship. According to him, tons of shops and public dining halls had been opened since they'd lifted off into space. Those

facilities remained in operation and now served as a place where colonists could relax.

"Whoa, it's popping in here!"

The dining hall in the base of the colonist ship was normal with no special features to speak of, almost resembling a food court. But the people eating there seemed *different* from the people we'd met in the colonies. *How do I put this?* It was like they were overflowing with life. They had a vitality, this overwhelming zeal, that separated them from colony residents.

"There still aren't many places where you can eat outside, after all, though people eat military rations outside pretty often these days. Food you've gotten tired of supposedly tastes better outdoors."

"Yeah, I can kinda see that."

"It's the same food. Why does it matter where you eat it?" the dwarf kid protested.

"Would you rather be eating your food all sad and alone or with a lovely lady? The situation makes a difference."

"Meh, I guess that's a good point."

Us three men talked nonsense as we grabbed the food and hauled it back to the seats the girls had gone off to save for us.

There wasn't much of anything noteworthy about the food selection, by the way. Frankly, the quality of the food that came from whatever automatic food cookers they had probably wouldn't be as good as the Steel Chefs on the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*. It was probably good enough to satisfy the tens of thousands of people on colonist ships for months on end, so it couldn't be that bad.

"This kind of food's gotta be bland for dwarves, huh?" I asked.

"What's that supposed to mean? Tryin' ta say you know something about dwarves?" the kid snapped.

"We learned a bit about dwarf culture back when we bought our mothership at a Vlad System colony. They're not here with us, but we have two dwarven mechanics on board."

“Guessing they’re women too, huh?” The dwarf glared at me, and I averted my eyes. *Yes, sir. Yes, they are.* “They say great men enjoy the sensual, but you’re pretty shameless about it.”

“I’m not exactly a great man.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t look or act the part.”

“Kid, cut it out…” Klein sighed.

“It’s cool,” I assured him. “Everyone knows that, anyway. I’m just a newbie who got a little famous because of the tournament.”

In truth, it hadn’t even been a year since I’d formally become a mercenary. Maybe the fact that the tournament had put my name out there before I could become famous on my own merit wasn’t a good thing…

“Anyway, I’ll have to do my best not to besmirch the good name of His Majesty the Emperor. He even complimented me after my tournament win streak.”

There were a lot of things that annoyed me during our time in the capital, but I relished the benefits that had come with it, like gateway rights and first-class citizenship. I wasn’t a loyal servant of His Majesty or anything, but I did want to do good work and avoid sullying his reputation after what he’d done for me…even if it did make me feel like I was dancing in the palm of his hand.

“Took you long enough.”

“As you can see, it’s packed.” I shrugged at Elma’s complaint and lined up the food on the table.

It was the sort of fast food you’d see anywhere—hot dogs, hamburgers, that kind of stuff. Carrying around food that required utensils only made things harder, after all. When you were in a big group like this, it was easier to grab a bunch of stuff that you could eat with your hands.

Chris’s eyes sparkled as she surveyed the junk food bounty. “It’s been so long since I ate something like this.”

Ah, right. Nobles don’t typically eat fast food. We’d had a meal like this back on the Sierra System resort planet, so maybe the memories were what set her eyes alight.

I couldn't help but notice Klein's face turning pale for a moment. Maybe Chris's words and appearance had clued him into her true identity. *Sorry, bud.*

"What's up after we finish eating?" I asked.

"Huh? O-oh… R-right," Klein stammered. "I was thinking we might take a stroll outside town."

"That's a great idea. In space, you never get opportunities to just enjoy nature. It'll be a valuable experience."

We never had any opportunities to see nature in the capital, either. There might have been parks or botanical gardens, but we hadn't gone to any.

Either way, it was time to dig in. The sight of Chris stuffing her face with junk food couldn't help but make me smile. She wasn't really chowing down, though; she was too refined for that. Meanwhile, Elma didn't hold back whatsoever.

She narrowed her eyes at me when she noticed my gaze. "What?"

"Nothing. Just admiring the way you eat."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"I mean, yeah. It'd be depressing if you were frowning and forcing yourself to take dainty little nibbles, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe, but if that's your idea of a compliment for a proper lady, then you're an idiot."

"Shame. I'll have to work on that." I shrugged.

She'd complained, but she didn't look too bothered. *Also, why are Mimi and Chris staring at me? Do you want me to appraise your eating styles, too? Actually, given the flow of the conversation, maybe that's not all that strange.*

* * *

We planned to go out into the undeveloped wilderness and enjoy a little nature after our meal. But just before we could board the antigravity hovercraft again, a siren started blaring. Clearly some sort of emergency was at hand.

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“Something wrong?”

“What kind of alert is that?”

“Klein?”

“This is…the pirate attack alert!” Klein screamed, panicking.

Ah. Pirate alert, huh?

“I didn’t think there’d be anyone stupid enough to attack at a time like this,” I muttered to myself as I jumped into the driver seat of the vehicle. “What level of urgency is this siren supposed to go off for?”

The controls are more straightforward than I expected. It looks as easy to control as an amusement park go-kart. It just floats along nice and simple. The dashboard doesn’t even display anything beyond the remaining energy. Easy peasy.

“S-sir?” Klein stammered.

“If pirates are attacking, then we gotta act. We’re mercs. It’s what we do. So, uh, I gotta borrow this.”

“Hey!”

Ignoring the panicking Klein, I turned on the hovercraft. With a low-pitched rumble, it gently lifted off the ground and began floating.

“Elma, Mimi. Let’s get going.”

“Don’t crash!” Elma sat in the passenger seat, fed up.

“Okay!” Mimi jumped in the back.

Chris wavered over, unsure what to do for a moment, before sitting next to Mimi. “I wasn’t sure if I should stay or not, but… There’s nothing I can do for anyone if I stay here. Instead, I should be the blade that protects my people.”

“Got it. What the client wants, the client gets,” I told her, then turned to our local guides. “By the way, thanks for the tour, guys. Give Clara our thanks, too.”

Having given up entirely, Klein sighed, “Ah… Good luck in your battle…” He waved his hand weakly in surrender.

The dwarf boy, whose name I still didn’t know, watched me with piercing eyes. “Don’t mess this up, merc.”

“Leave it to me. I’m Platinum Rank, y’know.”

With that, I spun the hovercraft around to point at the ship landing pad and put the pedal to the metal. *Ooo, this thing goes faster than I thought!*

“Don’t be too reckless!” Elma reminded me sternly.

There was no windshield, so the faster we went, the windier it got. That meant I had to raise my voice just for Elma to hear me, despite being right next to me.

“I’ll drive as safely as I can!”

“Master Hiro! Mei sent us information on the pirate attack!”

“Get ready to share the info as soon as we reach the ship!” I shouted. “And hold on tight! You don’t wanna get thrown off the hovercraft! You too, Chris!”

“Okay!”

Perhaps because of the sirens, there was—fortunately—no pedestrian traffic when we left the area around the colonist ship. Most people had probably evacuated into the ship base. Since it was lunchtime, it was likely most people had already been inside.

“How long until the pirates descend?” I demanded.

“We still have time!” Mimi replied. “The Count’s star system defense forces are slowing them down!”

“Good! Be ready to hop out!”

I drove at full throttle. I didn’t know how fast we were going, but it wasn’t at the point where it was hard to breathe. Maybe fifty kilometers an

hour, then? I continued at that pace until we'd reached the launch pad, stopped in front of the *Krishna*, and jumped out.

"Run! And don't trip and fall!" I rushed the girls forward while I used my terminal to deploy the *Krishna*'s trap ladder.

I was worried whether Chris would be able to run like this, but she was about as fast as Elma. Mimi was actually the slowest. Had Chris gotten physical augments like other nobles?

As soon as we all scrambled safely into the ship, I pressed the emergency close button to close both the trap and hatch before running into the cockpit.

"I think this might be our first time taking off in such a hurry," I said.

"Maybe!" Elma replied. "Switching generator output from idle to cruise!"

"Permission to launch received!" Mimi announced.

"Okay, fasten those seatbelts, girls!" I seized the controls and immediately went to full throttle to escape Kormat III's gravitational field. As the act of launching a spaceship was basically a bold attempt to completely defy gravity, inertial control systems alone couldn't fully eliminate the resulting pressure that hit us.

"Nnh…!" Mimi was the one who struggled the most with it. I was strong, and I was used to this. Surprisingly, Chris didn't so much as groan. It seemed she'd grown a lot stronger since our time together in the Sierra System. Or maybe her new status as heir meant they really had given her some serious augmentation.

"What's the plan, Hiro?"

"We wait at the very edge of the gravitational field. The moment they disengage the FTL drive, we shoot them down."

"Sounds reasonable enough."

The details of how it worked were beyond me, but FTL drive lets you move faster than light by somehow fudging the mass of a ship. When a ship in FTL drive normally approached a massive object, the safety features would disable the FTL drive to avoid a crash. Again, I didn't know the details, but it apparently sensed massive objects by detecting their gravity.

This was how interdictors stopped a target's FTL drive. Basically, they either increased the mass of a target or directly fired gravitational waves at it.

My plan was similar in theory. Pirates trying to land on a planet couldn't descend as long as their FTL drive was active; they had to switch to normal driving mode as soon as they entered a planet's gravitational orbit. After that, they'd have to calculate a trajectory and begin their descent. In that by-no-means short time, they would be defenseless.

What if they ignored the *Krishna* and descended? If they did, we'd be able to shoot them down with ease. They had to divert a large amount of thruster output in order to control their speed, so they wouldn't be able to make evasive maneuvers. Dodging laser cannon strikes, which moved at the speed of light, was out of the question. Even I couldn't do that.

While I considered our plan, a lock-on notification rang in the cockpit. *Were we too late?*

"This is the Kormat System army…" It was one of the star system army ships that had been deployed to Kromat III's satellite orbit. They quickly disabled their lock-on, apparently having figured out our affiliation. "Captain Hiro?"

"Yes, this is Captain Hiro speaking. We heard of a pirate attack while we were on the surface, so we made an emergency launch. We'll back you up. Also, given the circumstances, I'll forgive the lock-on."

"We appreciate the help…"

Yeah, right. I was tempted to tell him to confirm my ship registration *before* locking on to me, but now wasn't the time. Everyone makes mistakes. *I forgive you, my son…but will my giant cannons?!*

Chris stayed quiet. She didn't seem like she wanted to reveal her presence on the *Krishna*. Their captain would probably lose his mind with anxiety if she did, so that was for the best.

"Situation status?" I asked.

"Umm… It looks like the star system army is chasing the pirates around in FTL drive as we speak," Mimi replied. "They're trying to interdict them."

“Hmm. Maybe we didn’t need to rush out for this.”

It was probably just some idiot pirates who tried to attack Kormat III and got caught in the star system army or Imperial Fleet’s security network. That would be when the pirate alarm had sounded, but the army’s quick work would thwart their attack. They’d sent people to pursue at once, and now, they were in a faster-than-light chase.

“What now?” Elma asked me.

“I guess we just stand by. It’s gotta be interesting to watch and see how things develop, right, Chris?”

“Yes, sir.” Chris sided with me, so we decided to stand by on alert.

I’d have liked to follow the chase, but they were running all over the star system, so the *Krishna*’s hyperspace radar couldn’t detect them. A ship specialized for information warfare, or one like the *Black Lotus* with a large high-output radar, might be able to do better, but a small ship made for close-range combat just wasn’t built for such precision.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it. The *Black Lotus* is back in the colony, after all.”

“Should we call it?”

“Seems like a waste of time at this point.”

“That is true…”

Before long, the space pirates had been cornered by the star system army, putting an end to their schemes.

Since we’d destroyed the pirate base, the frequency of attacks on private ships had been on a steep decline. That meant that the star system army and Imperial Fleet had their hands free, which led to increased public safety in this star system.

“Still, plotting an attack on the Kormat System now, of all times… You think they’re trying some reverse psychology thing or something?” Elma wondered aloud.

“I dunno. Maybe the pirates are firing test rounds to check the security level or something. But if any of them survived, they’d be able to

interrogate and get the information out of them. Though it's possible that even the perps themselves don't know why they're here."

One possibility was that the pirates who'd attacked had been given bad information by their fellow pirates. Even if they were captured, it would be impossible to get useful information out of them if everything they knew was incorrect.

"Things got hectic at the end, but I'm glad we got to see how secure the Kormat System is firsthand, you know?"

"Yes, indeed. It was very helpful to see not just the state of the facilities and work on the surface, but the evacuation measures and military efforts as well," Chris said, though she was visibly disappointed.

"We've still got time, right? We could go for a nice drive around the star system, hang out on Kormat Prime, or relax in the *Black Lotus* if you want. Whatever you feel like. We'll join you."

"Yeah," Elma backed me up. "You're our mercenary-in-training until our time together is over, so spend that time how you like."

"We're friends, after all! Don't hold back!" Mimi added.

Chris hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "In that case, I'll take you up on your offer… I'd like to sightsee and relax in the colony, like you normally do. After all, I was always stuck in the ship in the Sierra System."

"Ah, yeah. We did end up going on vacation to a resort planet after. Let's do that, then."

"Kormat Prime is really lively and fun right now."

"Yup. There might be weirdos there, so let's just be careful as usual."

What about Mei, Tina, and Wiska, though…? If we get anywhere near the Black Lotus*, the media are gonna be a real pain. How about we just go by ourselves? Yeah… Let's do that.*

* * *

We immediately headed to the commercial district after arriving at Kormat Prime. I called Mei immediately when we arrived, and she really

saved the day. How did she do that? Well, I'd asked her to find a reason to keep the media staff on board the *Black Lotus* and she agreed. I even gave her permission to show them my bedroom if they seemed interested. No access to the storage area for land combat equipment, though; those were my secret weapons in case someone got on the ship, so I didn't want the whole Empire knowing what was in there.

"Sir Hiro, Sir Hiro! What is that?"

"What's what?"

Chris was interested in a shop that had merchandise based on fictional characters. Frankly, the whole anime subculture in this universe was extremely hard to follow, since trends differed in every single star system.

"Isn't that the little character you use in your messages, Elma?"

"Wow, it is! And that one's the one you use, Mimi."

"Ooh! It really is!"

Elma and Mimi found miniature figures of the character stickers they used in our messages. Elma used a silly-looking, one-eyed alien while Mimi's was a weird thing that looked like a cross between a cat and a squirrel.

"Didn't you have something like this in your room, Elma?" I asked.

"Yep. It's a pretty popular character, so you can find merch all over the place."

Apparently, they were the official characters of our messaging app. The ones Mimi and Elma used were only two of many such characters, of course. Lately, I'd been using stickers of this mean-looking dog character. I liked him because, despite his mean looks, you couldn't really hate the little guy.

"Sir Hiro, you use this one a lot, don't you?"

"Sure do."

"Then I'll buy this one, this one, and this one," Chris said as she picked up one of the mean dog, funny cyclops alien, and cat-squirrel figures. She paid using her tablet and gently placed them in her hip pouch.

“Wait, Chris! You use this one, don’t you?” Mimi picked up a character that looked like an anthropomorphic black cat. *Hey, I do recognize that one.*

“Urk… I-I’ll buy this one, too.”

Now she had all four. It made me smile, seeing how happy Chris was to have bought them. I was reminded that, despite how much she’d matured, Chris still acted her age in some ways.

“Uh, it’s really embarrassing when you stare at me like that, Sir Hiro.”

She looked up at me with flushed cheeks. I hadn’t meant to make her feel self-conscious. Before I could explain, I noticed someone boldly approaching us. Ever since I’d started my sword training, I’d become more sensitive to the presence of others.

Noticing the shift in my mood, Elma and Chris followed my eyes to where I was looking.

A man I didn’t recognize approached. His clothes looked a little worn, but they were well-made and resembled the business suits I remembered from Earth. *But, how do I put this?* Man, the vibes oozing off him were extremely not great. He was like a wild dog salivating over easy prey. To put it bluntly, the guy had real bad vibes. I sensed outright malice.

“I don’t like him,” I murmured.

“Agreed,” Elma said.

“Huh? Wha?” Mimi was shaken by the sudden change in mood.

Chris’s adorable smile from before quickly retreated, and her onyx eyes stared fixedly at the figure.

“Well, well! What a surprise to see you in a place like this,” he said, greeting Chris politely while positioning himself so as to block our way. “Good day, Your Excellency Governor-General.”

Chris didn’t answer. She just stared silently at him, unwilling to respond and urging him to get it over with and state his business.

“Oh, how rude of me. I am Byakki, from the Celaeno Times.” He smirked and tapped his left wrist with his right hand. A hologram was

projected on the back of his left hand—probably some employee ID with this so-called Celaeno Times. *Hmm? A bracelet terminal? Interesting.*

Even after the man had introduced himself, Chris remained silent. She continued to glare at this Byakki guy, her face otherwise emotionless. Chris may have still been a child, but she was the daughter of a noble family with a long history. She was also the governor-general, left in charge of this star system's governance. In other words, she had top authority here.

It had to be awfully imposing for her to glare at you. She was more or less saying, *You're spoiling my mood*. And a cold sweat did indeed roll down the man's brow.

Incidentally, I'd stood next to Chris this whole time, ready to step in front of her at a given moment. Elma took a few steps away and kept an eye on our surroundings. Basically, I was here to face down this suspicious guy, while she was ready for any additional troublemakers who might show up. Mimi, despite her confusion, dutifully waited behind Chris.

"Um, well…" he stammered. "Oh, you must be the mercenary Captain Hiro, yes? Do you have a personal relationship with Her Excellency?"

With the conversation now directed at me, I followed Chris's example and kept my mouth shut. *What does this guy even want, anyway? Why ask? The answer is obvious when you see us together like this. Is he just trying to get us to confirm it, or what?*

"H-ha ha… The silent treatment from both of you, I see. You don't seem to like small talk, so I'll be blunt… Your Excellency, the loss of both your parents and your uncle before your succession was decided has led to rumors that perhaps you conspi—"

Chris and I moved at almost the exact same time. Her right hand shot like lightning to the dagger on her left hip, while I held it down with my right hand so she couldn't draw it. *Phew, that was close. If I didn't stop her, she'd have whipped it right out.*

"My father and mother sacrificed themselves to save my life. I won't allow you to make a mockery of their deaths. You will suffer for this. Remember that." Chris looked more severe than ever.

It just wasn't possible. Her parents had given up their lives to protect her from the evil clutches of her uncle's hired assassin. It was natural to be furious if someone tried to imply that *she* had caused the killing.

"If I hadn't stopped her, you'd be sliced in two by now," I warned him. "Get the hell out of here."

Byakki paled, nodded stiffly, and ran away as fast as he could. When he was a safe distance from us, I finally let go of Chris's dagger. We locked eyes.

"No reason to bother cutting down small people like him, right?"

Chris lowered her eyes as if ashamed of her short temper. "Right. Thank you," she said.

I mean, it's normal to get mad when people accuse you of conspiring to kill your own parents. Killing him wouldn't stop those rumors from circulating, though. In fact, people might say she had no self-control. Stopping her was almost certainly the right decision. Not that I knew whether she'd really have killed him, of course.

"I'm a little thirsty. How about we go take a break somewhere?" Elma suggested.

"Good idea. Where should we go?" I asked, glancing at Mimi.

She took her tablet terminal out of a special pocket and confidently announced, "Leave it to me. I've got just the thing!"

"Fantastic. We're counting on your research skills, Mimi."

With that, Mimi led us to a restaurant outside of the packed commercial district where we could sit and have a drink.

"Wow, this place has a nice atmosphere."

"Doesn't it?"

Elma and Chris seemed to like it. Personally, I really wasn't too picky about this stuff. It did seem to have a relaxing atmosphere, as they'd said. The lighting was perfect; it wasn't too bright inside, but it wasn't dark, either. And it was clean to boot. This universe's restaurants often had trash all over the floor, so you could say this one was outstandingly clean. That alone gave it high marks in my books.

“Welcome. Table for four?” a guide bot asked us.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Right this way. I’ll show you to your seat.” The tower-shaped guide bot, which only came up to my waist, began gliding toward the back of the restaurant. There were a lot of female customers here. There were a good number of nonhuman diners, too, so I guess I couldn’t say for certain that they were all women.

We were shown to a secluded table in the back.

“I think I’ll get something cold…” Elma muttered to herself.

“I’d like hot tea,” Chris said.

“Oh, Sir Hiro, they have a tea and pastry combo!”

“I think I’ll get that. How about you, Chris?”

“Um… Okay, I’ll go with that, too.”

In the end, everyone but Elma decided to get the tea and pastry combo.

“Being with you all makes me think that…maybe this is the real me.”

“The real you?”

“You all treat me as a regular, powerless girl. As you should, considering my age. Nobody else around me seems to understand that I’m…” Chris trailed off, forcing a small smile.

Hmm, I see. Maybe she feels like her lifestyle is too much for her. I can’t blame her. She’s younger than Mimi. So young that the Grakkan Empire recognizes her as a child. Despite that, they’re pushing all these adult responsibilities onto her because of her status as the Dalenwald heir. There’s so much pressure on her poor little shoulders. And right after she lost her parents…

“If it’s what you want, and you say you won’t regret it, then I’d be happy to kidnap you, Chris.”

“Excuse me, Hiro?” Elma glared at me accusingly.

Sure, if I did that, Count Dalenwald would be pissed. I have an honorary noble title from the Grakkan Empire, so I doubt I’d suddenly be a

wanted man, but…I don't want to imagine having to deal with even more trouble than I already do.

Chris grinned wryly. "Tempting…" she murmured. "The temptation is much too sweet, Sir Hiro."

Just then, a catering bot brought out our orders and placed them in front of us. We silently sipped our tea.

Chris then looked down into her cup and said, "But Sir Hiro, did you not try to kidnap me before?"

She's not wrong.

"The situation's different now. Back then, you needed to return to your family, and I was just a merc who happened to have a little skill. Today, I'm a Platinum Rank mercenary with a Gold Star. We can get away with being reckless once in a while."

It might lead to conflict with Count Dalenwald, but if I carried myself well, it wouldn't be fatal. Still, I probably had a lot to lose. But I wasn't the only one whose trust and reputation would be damaged; both Chris herself *and* the Dalenwald family wouldn't exactly look squeaky clean either.

"Seeing you like this worries me, Chris. Do you really need to rush things so much? Why not have a little bit of a moratorium, y'know?"

Chris was a good girl. She was doing her best to fill her parents' shoes, who'd died for her sake, and was working her absolute hardest to earn the acceptance and approval of Count Dalenwald and the other noble families.

However, she was still a child. Bodily augmentation gave her strength beyond that of most adults and drastically improved her brain's processing speed, but she was still just a kid. Here I was, trying to come up with some complex justification. But did it matter? That wasn't how I worked.

"Honestly, I just can't bear to see you tearing yourself apart for your work, Chris. If that's what you want, then that's fine. But if your grandfather is making you do this against your will, then I'm glad to help you jumpstart your rebellious phase."

Is it not outright child abuse to expect a little girl to take care of an entire star system? Well, maybe it was just that this universe's morals—and those of the Grakkan Empire—disagreed with my own.

"That's some classic Hiro reasoning for you." Elma sighed.

"It sure is. He can never let a cute girl face trouble alone," Mimi joked.

"Look, men are gonna prioritize cute girls. Dudes are gonna have to handle themselves." I wasn't a philanthropist or a saint. "But being cute or pretty doesn't mean that everyone's going to help you."

"Is that true?" Elma raised an eyebrow. "Mm, maybe. Anyway, what do you want to do, Chris? Do you want to live the mercenary life with us, with all of its fun, danger, and thrills?"

Chris hesitated. "No, I don't think I should. It is a very, very attractive offer, but… I'm Christina Dalenwald. It's just…"

"Go on."

"If you're willing to go through all that trouble for me, Sir Hiro, I do have another request. Will you hear me out?" Chris looked up at me pleadingly. *She's just too cute. But that doesn't mean I can just give her an outright yes.*

"Sure, I'll hear you out. But I just want to make sure you know that I can't do the impossible, okay?"

"Yes, I know. The thing is, if you ever decide that you're ready to rest your wings, I want you to rely on me."

I groaned to myself a little. That was pretty much exactly what I'd discussed with Mimi, Elma, and Mei before: if I leaned on the Dalenwald family for this, I'd probably get preferential treatment. But in return, I'd likely be used by the family sooner or later. In the future, I wanted to have kids with Mimi and Elma and build a home in Dalenwald territory. That would mean being forced into a closer relationship with the Dalenwald family, making it likely that I'd be given work in exchange for favors. In the worst case, they could even take my family hostage while I was away in order to force me to do what they wanted, if our relationship went south.

“Okay. I’ll rely on you first, but I’ll make my decision based on the current circumstances when the time comes.”

“Yes, that’s enough for me. I can do my best, knowing I’ll be able to give you a place to come home to someday.” Chris smiled.

Man, she’s an admirable one.

Her kindness struck Mimi’s heart, prompting her to pull Chris into a hug without saying so much as a word.

“I’m glad everything wrapped up nicely,” Elma said. “Don’t jump the gun so much, okay?”

“My bad. But I had a feeling things would end up this way.”

“Really?”

I shrugged at Elma. “Really.”

Chris was a good girl, but she was strong, too. If she still couldn’t bear it, then I’d be happy to be her place to run away to—but it seemed my worries were unfounded.

Epilogue

A FEW DAYS AFTER our outing to Kormat III and Kormat Prime, our month-long contract came to an end, and I met Chris in her office on Kormat Prime, as promised.

"This marks the end of our work with the Dalenwald family."

Our current employment contract had the following stipulations: we worked for one month, and we would discuss whether the contract would be renewed after that month was up. At most, we would work for three months.

Over the past month, we'd defeated many pirates, crushed their base, and defeated the person—believed to be Goeritz Ixamal—who'd worked with the pirates to sabotage the Dalenwald family's colonization efforts. Our actions drastically reduced pirate activity in the area, making the Kormat System safer than ever. It was a pretty busy month.

"Sir Hiro, you've lived up to our expectations. We will report our appraisal of your work to the mercenary guild, so you may rest easy. Your reward should be deposited into your account tomorrow."

"Glad to hear it."

"I'll be lonely… Really, I'd love to have you by my side forever."

I was sure that Mimi and Elma liked Chris, too, but we were mercenaries. There would come a day when we'd settle down once and for all, but that wouldn't be today.

"Sorry," I told her. "I can't do that for you."

It was late, almost nighttime. Behind Chris, who sat at the other end of the big office desk, shone the "nighttime" view of Kormat Prime. From 6 p.m. to 5 a.m., Kormat Prime observed nighttime, which meant that the space lights in the colony were turned off to simulate night.

Chris gazed up at my face, the nighttime view behind her. "My feelings still haven't changed," she said, looking directly into my eyes.

“I guess I should thank you,” was all I managed to reply. I’d be a real playboy if I had something clever to say here, but unfortunately, I didn’t have the gumption for that.

“How long will it be until I get to see you again, Sir Hiro?”

“I…don’t know.”

“Of course. You’d never want to meet a troublemaking little girl like me unless I had work for you…”

“C’mon, don’t be like that. You know that’s not true.”

Having any type of relationship with her was obviously out of the question due to the mess of problems it posed, but that didn’t mean I hated her. I mean, how could I complain about having a cute girl admiring me like that? It’s just that our positions were incompatible.

“Then you do not detest me, Sir Hiro?”

“I do not detest you.”

Her onyx eyes seemed to take on a bewitching glint. Maybe I’d just imagined it, but either way, it caused me to take an unconscious step back. *Why do I hear alarm bells ringing in my head?*

“By the way, I see you’re alone today…”

“Uh, yeah. Mimi and Elma said they’d stay on the ship… Mei is busy performing final checks on the data the media companies are taking home.”

“I see. Sir Hiro, I’m worried.” Chris put a hand on her cheek and tilted her head, concerned.

“Worried?” I tilted my head back in confusion. The bewitching look from before was gone. Now, she looked genuinely worried about me.

“I’m afraid you’ll have many more opportunities to interact with other nobles in the future. Some will want your power and your ships, and others will plot to make them their own.”

“I get it. Yeah, that might happen,” I agreed. It was possible that I might get attention from people like that.

From now on, I’ll be more watchful—uh, Chris? My thoughts were interrupted by Chris’s beaming smile and her putting her hands on her clothes. “What are you…?”

“Eek,” Chris cried.

What the heck was that? It just sounded like her normal speaking voice. What’s with the deadpan?

“Sir Hiro, you mustn’t.”

“Huh? Wha?!”

She moved slowly, unclasping the buttons and clasps of her clothing. She loosened her top, showing off her thin bra and bare neck, flushed a slight pink.

Hey, hold on. That’s enough of that.

“Ooh, no, Sir Hiro. Don’t be sooo rough with me.”

“Hey, what?! Wh-what are you doing?!”

“And to complete the scene, I’ll press this button to summon my guards.” Chris reached for a small, egg-shaped item on her desk.

“Stop!” I ran over in a panic and seized her wrist.

“Hee hee. If someone saw us now, you wouldn’t be able to talk your way out of it, would you?”

Now that I was close enough to feel her breath, she grinned mischievously and looked provocatively up at me. Her flushed cheeks, soft lips, and fair neckline seemed alluring for some reason. I averted my eyes.

“Chris, you shouldn’t be playing these kinds of pranks. We’re good friends, but this is too far.”

“Yes, I apologize. But be careful, okay?”

“Careful of what?”

The moment I looked to Chris to ask, she wrapped her free left arm around my neck and, with perfect precision, put her lips on mine. I froze in shock for a moment before pulling away.

She looked up into my eyes. “Bad noblewomen might contrive a situation to take advantage of you, just like this. Never meet a noblewoman other than me alone, okay?”

I paused, then said, “Okay.”

What was going on here? I could cut through nobles to take first place in the tournament, and I'd survived vicious wildlife *and* a sword-wielding behemoth on Kormat IV. But I was helpless before Chris?

Apparently overjoyed by my obedient reply, Chris finally pulled away with the look of a mischievous feline. Then, she slowly fixed her top, as if trying to provoke a reaction from me. Fortunately for both of us, I wasn't a creep who was into young girls.

"We could still contrive that situation, if you'd like," she added.

"Stop trying to seduce me, please. Jeez. You really grew to be a bad girl in so little time."

"Girls grow fast. Especially those in love," Chris said with a smile. I could only keep my mouth shut.

* * *

"Girls are scary."

"Is this sudden-onset gynophobia?" Mei asked.

Unfortunately, she'd missed the mark entirely.

It wasn't that serious. Yet, I couldn't help but worry because on my way out, Chris had said the following: "Come and see me again. When you don't come back for long periods of time, I get so lonely that I pour my heart out to my grandfather."

Knowing Chris, that was probably a joke. It *was* a joke, right?

"No, I'm fine. Probably. No problems here."

"Is that so? I'm glad to hear it," Mei said with a nod. We were in the cockpit of the *Black Lotus*, reviewing the media footage. Mei displayed multiple videos on the main screen of the *Krishna* destroying pirate ships, the Imperial Fleet bombarding the pirate base, the *Krishna* during the air raid destroying the grapplers and bulls, and Serena and I swinging our swords in the dust storm.

"I've finished checking all of the recording data taken by each media company. All parts relating to your ships' security have been redacted."

“Thanks. That must have been hard.”

“It took some time, but it was not a complex task.”

“That may be, but still, thank you. I’d like to reward you somehow, but what would you even want?”

Mei had few to no material desires, so she didn’t take wages. As such, I had no idea how to reward her.

“A reward?” she repeated.

“Yeah, a reward. You may be a Maidroid, and working for me may be your job, but you’re doing great work. I don’t think it’s all that weird to want to show my gratitude somehow.”

“I see. Then, in that case…” She opened her arms wide, face totally expressionless.

Is she asking for a hug, or…?

“Hug me, please.”

“Hmm?”

“Maidroids are able to replenish a substance called Masterinium when hugged by our masters, increasing our capabilities.”

“Huh? If you just want a hug, I’ll definitely give you one, but…”

“Yes, please.”

Is this Maidroid humor? I wondered as I approached the waiting Mei. When I did hug her, she returned the favor by wrapping her arms around me. How could a machine smell this good? I could at least explain her body warmth, assuming it was the heat from her mechanical parts. Despite having muscles and bones made of special alloys, she was just as soft as a real woman. Perhaps Mei was the most mysterious thing in this universe, even more so than the *Krishna* and *Black Lotus*.

We stayed like that for a while, then both finally let go at once. After our prolonged hug, Mei was no longer expressionless; she gave off an air of joy and satisfaction. Her lips had turned up into the slightest, almost imperceptible smile.

“Did you get your Masterinium or whatever it is?”

“Yes. It seems my processing abilities have increased by 4 percent.”

“Glad to hear it.”

It probably was Maidroid humor, but if she really had been boosted by 4 percent, that would be awesome. If we hugged every day, she’d double her performance in no time.

Now, once the media staff secure a ride home, it’s time to say goodbye to this star system. I can’t help but feel like I’m forgetting something, but…eh, it’s probably not that important.

I was curious as to what would happen to the Ixamal family in the future, and whether or not that four-sworded monster really was Goeritz, but to figure those mysteries out would only sate my curiosity; it wouldn’t come with any real benefit.

In contrast, the risks that would come with knowing the truth weren't worth it. Just knowing the truth of the matter might attract the ire of the Ixamal family, after all. It'd be wisest to leave as soon as we were ready.

* * *

The media staff had left, we'd finished resupplying, and the *Black Lotus* and *Krishna* were ready to depart. We'd sold off all the ships we'd captured, giving the mechanics some well-earned rest. I'd heard they were out drinking until late last night; even now that it was nearly noon, they still hadn't emerged from their room. Mei said their vitals were stable though, so they were surely just sleeping it off.

"Hmm… Leaving with an empty cargo bay feels like a waste," Mimi sighed.

"Nothing we can do about it." Elma shrugged. "Kormat Prime is in an economic boom. Everything's in high demand."

"We'll just have to stop by a trading colony on the way and pick out some goods," I chimed in.

If we were leaving, it'd be nice to have cargo to make some pocket change off of, but Elma was right: everything here was in high demand, sending prices skyrocketing and making it inefficient to buy and resell goods here. Though the people *bringing* goods were no doubt making bank.

"Mei, do we have a route to the Leafil System?"

"Yes. We are free to leave any time."

"Got it. We're not in a hurry, so let's stop by as many trading colonies as possible along the way. We'll find and stock up on things that seem like they'll sell for good money at the Leafil System."

"Understood. I will arrange our travel schedule in order to stop by a trading colony just beyond the Nipak System's gateway."

"Please do. Now, let's get going."

"Yes. I'll begin the launch procedures right away," Mei said, disappearing from the holo-display.

Before long, we felt the *Black Lotus* moving. The lounge didn't have any windows, so the outside world was picked up by external optical sensors and displayed on the holo-display for us.

"Ah…"

"Uh…"

"Oh, no…"

A single person was picked up by the external optical sensors. Perhaps thanks to Mei, the relevant window was enlarged on the holo-display. It was a woman wearing a white military uniform, a giant sword on her hip. At a glance, she looked to be smiling at the departing *Black Lotus*…but the dangerous glint in those eyes showed that her smile wasn't genuine.

"Hiro, did you forget to talk to Serena?"

"Ummm… Ha ha…" I'd had the feeling I'd forgotten something, and here it was. I'd forgotten to speak to Serena. Whoops.

Somehow, she seemed certain that we were watching her through the optical sensors that she slowly, and deliberately mouthed words for us.

"Um… 'You owe me,' I think?" Mimi read her lips out loud.

"So bossy," I complained. Was I not the one who'd helped Serena this time around? Of course, it was kind of rude of me to leave without saying a word to her… Ugh, fine, I'm the jerk. Sure!

"Well, it's your own fault, Hiro."

"I can't defend you this time. I'm sorry, Master Hiro."

"Aw…" I protested their immediate surrender, but I couldn't not overturn their decisions. *Damn! So it's mutiny, then…*

The Lieutenant Colonel faded from view as the *Black Lotus* launched from Kormat Prime. I just prayed that she wouldn't use this to make unreasonable demands of me the next time we meet.

"Routing complete. Charging FTL drive. Counting down. Five, four, three, two, one… Activating FTL drive."

A big boom punctuated Mei's announcement and the stars on the holo-display turned into lines that flowed behind us.

“It looks like we go through the Melkit, Jeagle, and Wellick Systems to reach the Nipak System’s gateway. Then four systems later, we hit the Leafil System.”

“It looks like we’ll have a peaceful journey for once… Right?” Mimi said hopefully.

“Yeah, definitely. Probably. Maybe…” I sighed.

A look at the Galaxy Map told us that the Leafil System was fully within the Grakkan Empire’s sphere of influence and had a high security rating. That meant that the star system army and Imperial Fleet had a strong presence, with little pirate activity and low threat of invasion by other countries or space beasts. In other words, mercenaries like us wouldn’t find much work there. It wasn’t a very attractive place in our line of business.

“I hope so…” Elma replied after some silence.

“Huh? What’s all the hesitation about? Do you expect something to happen?” I demanded.

“Mmm… Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine…” she said, trailing off vaguely. She tended to be very blunt, so this was concerning. Then again, she was usually pretty vague about stuff when it came to nobles or her family. Maybe this meant that she expected trouble in that regard.

“We’re not gonna run into another brother way too obsessed with his sister, are we?”

“No, that’s not it, but… Eh, it’ll be easier if you just see for yourself.”

“Just tell me, please.”

“It’s hard to explain.” Elma grinned wryly.

She’s making it sound like we’re gonna run into trouble.

I let out a sigh, leaned back into the lounge’s couch, and stared at the ceiling. This was pretty much business as usual, but I sure did want some peace and quiet in my life for once.

Afterword

THANK YOU for picking up Volume 8 of *Reborn as a Space Mercenary*! Finally, Volume 8. We did it!

As usual, I've spent much of my days gaming. I'm a Tarnished these days. My favorite weapon is the Great Hammer. I love to hold it two-handed and jump attack! The attack where you swing it all around is fun, too.

It's all about violence. Violence solves all problems!

I've been playing other games, too! I'm an assassin in Valhalla, plundering riverside villages and monasteries, an alchemist running an atelier, and more… Yeah, input is important to me! It's all part of my training, too. Heh heh heh.

Let's put my weird updates aside and talk about the book.

This volume mainly features terraforming, planetary colonization, and noble conspiracies. Also, after Chris's brief appearance in the last volume, she has her first major role since Volumes 3 and 4.

Lieutenant Commander Serena is like a main character at this point, and she shows up many times in this volume as well. That means Hiro is subjected to her and Chris's whims.

The big centerpiece of this volume is the land battle in poor environmental conditions. Amid a raging dust storm on a mid-terraforming planet, Hiro is forced to fight biological weapons without so much as power armor… Poor guy. Who could have done this to him? Oh, of course, *Serena* is the one who dragged him into this. Blame her!

That about does it for this volume's rough contents. Let's get to the part where we talk about some smaller-setting-related elements that won't get spotlighted in the text.

How about we discuss Nya and Zwya this time?

First, to be blunt, Nya is modeled after a faceless god in a very famous cosmic horror novel, while Zwya is based on a deity that's sort of

like an incarnation of fire from a similar series of novels. Much like the original work, they fight like cats and dogs, but Zwya's introduction as a beastfolk with fur like fire is an original spice added by yours truly.

Nya is a member of an extremely rare humanoid alien race with great abilities and hedonistic tendencies. Zwya's race is similarly a humanoid alien type, often blunt and impulsive with great vitality. These two races' homelands are quite close to one another. They've even been at war in the past, so they have a poor relationship.

While they may not get along today, it *is* better than times past; once upon a time, they were on such bad terms that if members of these races encountered each other, they would immediately start fighting to the death.

Now that I've said everything I want to say, I think it's about time I get going!

Thank you to my manager, K; Tetsuhiro Nabeshima, our illustrator; and everyone involved in the publication of this book. Most of all, a huge thank-you to everyone who bought and read this book.

Let's meet again in Volume 9! I'm sure it'll come out! C'mon already!

—RYUTO

About the Author

Ryuto

A BROWN BEAR LIVING IN HOKKAIDO.

My hobby is gaming. I have a wide range of tastes, but survival action and strategy games are my absolute favorites.

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